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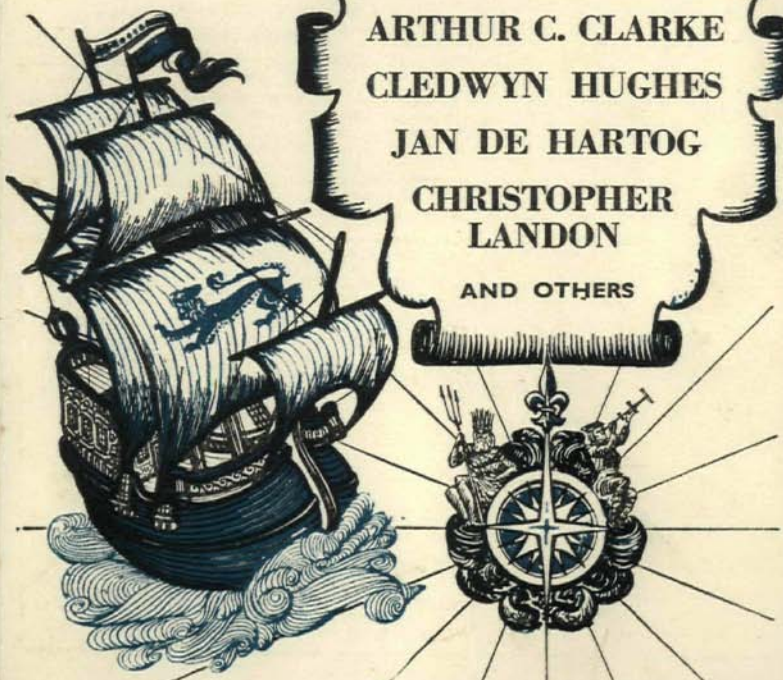

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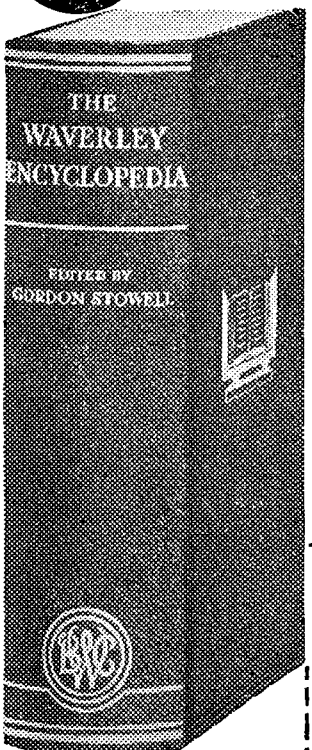

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ARGOSY

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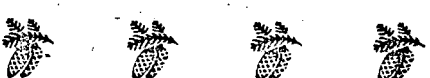
Song

Go to the shine that's on a tree
When dawn has laved with liquid light
With luminous light the nighted tree
And take that glory without fright.

Go to the song that's in a bird
When he has seen the glistening tree,
That glorious tree the bird has heard
Give praise for its felicity.

Then go to the earth and touch it keen,
Be tree and bird, be wide aware
Be wild aware of light unseen,
And unheard song along the air.

RICHARD EBERHART,
Go to the Shine That's on a Tree



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NAKED TRUTH

"Has any other man," he asked "ever gazed upon your beauty"

by ROBERT STANDISH

AMONG his fellow merchants, Quong was rated a broad-minded man. Had he not married Pearl of the Morning, despite her upbringing as a Christian? Like most citizens of Kenming, Quong did not approve of Christianity. In the small towns along the Yangtze, converts were known scornfully as "rice Christians." Which is to say that in time of famine they had listened to the talk of the missionaries for the sake of a good meal.

Pearl of the Morning, who was of surpassing loveliness, owed her survival to the fact that her parents had been "rice Christians." She had been born in a year of great famine, when girl children were fetching a mere seventy-five cents or a dollar each on the open market.

Three months after his marriage, Quong was called upon to make a long journey, nearly a thousand miles down river, to Shanghai. Bidding his wife an affectionate farewell and promising to bring her back a length of rare brocaded silk, Quong took ship for the great coastal metropolis.

In those early days travel was hazardous. It was unthinkable, therefore, even had it been seemly, that Quong should have taken his wife with him, although, as the ship bore him down the mighty Yangtze, there were several nights when sleep came to him with difficulty as he remembered with delight the triple dimples that, like jewels, adorned the thighs of Pearl of the Morning. Nor was there any comfort in the thought that he would be away for several months.

In Shanghai, Quong saw for the first time the new marvel, the moving picture. It was wonderful. Of that there could be no doubt, even though these shadow-like pictures were made by the foreign barbarians. From a purely technical and academic viewpoint, Quong became a confirmed addict of films and, during the four months he was in Shanghai, he saw every change of programme. Best of all, he liked the horse operas; next the slapstick comedies.

What really aroused Quong's displeasure, however, were the

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social "dramas" in which unfaithful wives played the most important and decorative roles. It was as much as Quong could do to remain in his seat while one of these was being shown. He was, it must be remembered, the forty-five-year-old husband of a sixteen-year-old wife, who was very lovely.

"Tell me," he said to the manager of one of the cinema theatres as he left, "are the people who take part in these films Christians?"

"Without doubt," replied the manager. "These pictures come from California where, I am told, the Christians are so numerous that they do not trouble to have missionaries. Why do you ask?"

"I always knew, of course," said Quong uneasily, "that the Christians were depraved, but I had no idea that the men were so utterly devoid of right thinking that they permitted their wives to be unfaithful with impunity."

It was these reflections that caused Quong to complete his business in Shanghai several weeks earlier than he had anticipated, and, taking a somewhat less comfortable ship, hasten his return home. He left the larger ship at Hankow, proceeding the rest of the way in a junk that carried a mixed cargo for the lesser river towns. The junk arrived at Kenming shortly before midnight, in driving rain. Much to his annoyance, Quong could not find any conveyance to take him to his house, which was situated several miles out in the country. Making the best of things, therefore, he went to his favourite restaurant, hoping to find there some of his fellow merchants, with whom he could wine and dine and learn the trend of events during his absence.

The restaurant was open, for it catered for those who roistered all through the night, but Quong was disappointed to find none of his friends. Accordingly, he took a private room in which to eat, deciding to sleep on the couch provided, and to make his way home in the morning. After a good meal, Quong lay down, but sleep somehow eluded him. Perhaps it was the heavy food; perhaps, also, it was the noise of other diners in the next room, from which came the sound of much laughter and the clatter of dishes.

Suddenly, Quong swung upright. His brow became bedewed with a cold sweat.

". . . and I tell you," said a voice from the next room, the voice of a young man, "she is lovelier than I ever imagined a woman could be. Her laughter is like the tinkle of silver bells and on each thigh she has three small dimples, clustered together in a way that is altogether enchanting . . . but, unfortunately, her husband, a rich old merchant, will be returning soon . . ."

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Quong thought of making inquiries of the servants as to the identity of the speaker, but decided that he could not afford to risk appearing foolish. Instead, he lay awake until dawn, torturing himself with vivid fears. He remembered, too, the more lurid incidents in some of the motion pictures he had seen, when women, with complete disregard for the decencies, had flaunted their infidelities upon the screen.

Pearl of the Morning received Quong with every sign of delight, and so completely did he fall again under the spell of her beauty that his unworthy suspicions were lulled. He even abandoned his intention of compelling his wife to renounce Christianity. No woman, he was sure, could be more devoted, more affectionate, more faithful than Pearl of the Morning. He was, indeed, a most fortunate man, who had harboured unjust suspicions. To atone for these, he presented his wife with a fine emerald brooch in addition to the promised length of brocaded silk, for which he had paid thirty dollars a yard.

All would have gone smoothly, doubtless, but for one of those small accidents that, unpredictable and therefore unavoidable, occur to make the way of the transgressor a difficult one. Quong, suffering from a severe pain in the stomach as a result of having eaten too many crayfish, returned home one afternoon several hours before his usual time.

On entering his garden and approaching his house, Quong forgot the ills of the flesh, which paled before the anguish of his spirit as from an upper window he heard, clear beyond all doubt, the voice and laughter of the young man who, on the night Quong had returned from Shanghai, had boasted to his cronies of the young beauty who possessed three dimples on each thigh.

So great was Quong's rage, anguish, and jealousy that, throwing all cunning to the winds, he bellowed like an angry bull, thus giving warning to the guilty couple upstairs.

When he reached his wife's room, Pearl of the Morning looked up at him sweetly from some embroidery and appeared quite unconcerned. Quong at once began a search of the house, finding, as may be expected, nothing. Before his rage could expend itself, as he knew it would, Quong cut a pliant length of bamboo and gave Pearl of the Morning a severe beating. This she received in silence and with a certain dignity, giving rise to doubts in Quong's mind as to the justice of his action.

For Quong there began weeks of misery. Although he pretended to be sure of his wife's guilt, in his innermost heart he was unsure. He laid traps, pretended to go away on journeys, and changed his mind. He gave up all regularity of habit, but

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in vain. At last, becoming ill with his tortured imaginings, Quong sought advice from a friend.

"It is a very simple matter," said Quong's friend, "and in a very short time you may set your mind at rest. First, you must invent some reason for a journey to the Bitter Lake. On the far side of this, some four hours distant, is a small cone-shaped mountain, at the top of which is a shrine. The people of the district call this the Shrine of Truth, and it is well known among them that any person swearing a false oath before the shrine will die before the next sunrise.

"Bring your wife to my house tonight and I shall arrange that the subject is mentioned among the women. It happens that my favourite concubine comes from a village at the foot of the hill. She knows many stories about it."

"My friend," said Quong, "I do not know how to thank you."

All went as Quong's old friend had predicted. Pearl of the Morning, her eyes wide with amazement and horror, listened to a dozen or more tales of those who, having sworn false oaths before the Shrine of Truth, were overtaken by a dire fate. The fact of having been taught by the missionaries that such tales were impious nonsense did not influence her in the smallest degree.

As she returned home, she was thankful that Quong knew of no such place, or of its story, for the sad fact is that Pearl of the Morning did indeed have a lover, a young man named Ching who for many months had been enjoying her favours. Ching, from whose parents Quong had bought the house, knew of a secret passage from a ruined monastery, by which, without ever appearing at the gate, he could enter and leave the house at will.

Then, one evening, when Pearl of the Morning believed that the storm had blown over and that her husband's suspicions were quietened, Quong asked her point-blank whether she had ever betrayed him and whether any other man had been privileged to see the three dimples on each of her thighs? With a calm, level gaze, which nine-tenths convinced Quong, she declared her innocence.

"Then," said Quong, eyeing her narrowly, "you could have no possible reluctance to swear to your innocence in solemn form?"

"None whatever, my husband," said Pearl of the Morning, whose heart, nevertheless, missed a beat. "If it is your will, then it is mine also."

"Two days hence," said Quong, "we shall start out on a journey together. On the other side of the Bitter Lake is a small

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mountain, on the top of which is the Shrine of Truth . . ." Quong related to her in great detail the rest of the tale, with which she was already familiar. Somehow, the guilty girl retained her calm, once more making Quong feel cruel and unreasonable. But he was determined to see the matter through.

When on the following morning Ching came by the secret way to her room, she was panic-stricken, but somehow over the ensuing delightful hours, Ching managed to quieten her fears.

" Trust me," he said, " and all will be well."

After a six-day journey, Quong and his wife reached the foot of the mountain on which the Shrine of Truth was perched. The long climb up the smooth stone steps to the shrine seemed interminable.

Pearl of the Morning was in a frenzy of anxiety. True, Ching her lover had told her to fear nothing, but those were mere words. In her inmost heart she knew full well that she would never dare to swear a false oath before the shrine. If nothing intervened to help her, she knew she must admit the whole shameful truth when the time came. And the time was not far off. Another thousand steps; another twenty minutes . . .

There, looming ahead, was the shrine.

So great was the heat that Quong threw off his robe, leaving it to be picked up on the way down. Pearl of the Morning, who was wearing no more than a tight silk jacket and trousers, could shed nothing.

" I must rest a little," said she, sitting down upon a stone coping.

" Indeed," said Quong, glad of the rest, " since Truth lodges in such a remote spot, it is small wonder that there are so many liars, who know her not! "

In five minutes they began again their weary plod upwards. Quong led the way. He did not, therefore, see exactly how Pearl of the Morning slipped and fell. He merely heard her cry and turned to see what was the matter.

" What is it? " he asked, his voice harsh with anxiety at her moans.

" There is great pain—here." She touched her right hip-bone. " Let me rest. In a little while I shall be able to continue the climb."

But as time went on, the young wife's groans became louder. For a few fleeting seconds Quong suspected that this was a ruse to avoid the ordeal at the shrine, but the unworthy thought was driven away by the sheer realism of the groans and cries.

For more than an hour they remained thus. At length, far

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above them, Quong saw the figure of a man descending the steps from the shrine. "Sir," said Quong as the stranger reached them, "may I ask of your charity that, when you arrive at the village yonder, you will send chair coolies to carry my wife, who has, I fear, sustained a serious injury?"

"Where," asked the stranger, turning to Pearl of the Morning, who lay groaning, "is the pain? Show me exactly."

With her delicately manicured hand, Pearl of the Morning indicated the spot, her groans growing louder.

"Happily for your wife, sir," said the stranger, "I am a physician. If, as I suspect, your wife is suffering merely from a slight dislocation, she will have no need of chair coolies. Will you permit me to make an examination?"

"By all means, sir. Your arrival is providential."

Between them, Quong and the doctor removed Pearl of the Morning's silk trousers, easing them from her gently so as to cause no needless pain.

"You, sir," said the doctor, "hold your wife from the rear, clasping your arms under hers. Hold her tightly, as I must use great force."

So saying, the doctor seized the groaning girl by the right foot and, planting his own foot, from which he had removed his shoe, in her groin, gave a sharp pull. Pearl of the Morning screamed and the doctor released his hold, signifying that Quong should do likewise.

"Now," said the doctor, "stand up. It may cause a little pain, but it will do no harm."

Obediently, Pearl of the Morning rose to her feet, smiling bravely through her tears.

"Now walk a little, slowly," said the doctor.

For the next few minutes, under the doctor's direction, she walked to and fro, exercising the limb.

"Forgive the impertinence, sir," said the doctor, "but now that your wife's injury is no longer dangerous, allow me to congratulate you—and her—on the possession of those three dimples on her thighs. They are the mark of those rarely favoured by the gods."

Pearl of the Morning blushed, turning away her head. Greatly pleased by this modesty, Quong turned graciously to the doctor.

"I do not know how to thank you for this timely help, sir," he said, "but you have only to command me."

"Now," said the doctor, waving aside Quong's thanks, "it is highly important that your wife should keep moving. Otherwise, there may be a severe and painful stiffness. I will help you to take her down the hill in safety, one of us on either side."

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"But no," protested Pearl of the Morning in an agonized voice, "we must go up the hill and not down. We have an appointment at the shrine," she told the doctor, "and at all costs we must go on."

"Let us forget this foolish business," said Quong contritely, delighted at his wife's determination to see the matter through, and equally determined not to press it. "We must accept the help of the kind doctor and make the descent together."

Pearl of the Morning shook her head obstinately. "Even if the pain kills me," she said through gritted teeth, "we shall go on. Your pledge, and mine, must be fulfilled."

"Will it harm her?" asked Quong.

"Not if she goes slowly," replied the doctor, "and, since she is evidently in a fever to go to the shrine, it might do her more harm to cross her will in this matter than to allow her to make the effort. If at any time it appears to me that she is overstraining herself, I shall take it upon myself to order a rest."

Feeling that now the whole affair was out of his hands, Quong shrugged his shoulders and gave way. Pearl of the Morning, aided by the two men, plodded doggedly up the stairs towards the shrine.

Quong, realizing now how base and unworthy his suspicions had been, was in an agony of remorse.

"And now, my husband," Pearl of the Morning said, when at last they stood before the shrine, "let us put an end to this unhappiness. Ask me what you will."

"I think," said the doctor, with great tact and delicacy, "that since this is evidently a private matter, which does not concern me, I shall stand aside, waiting only to help your wife on the return journey."

With these words, the doctor walked to the far side of the little plateau on which stood the shrine, gazing out across the symmetrical pattern of the rice fields far below.

"Then," said Quong, feeling happier, "since you insist, I shall ask one question only."

"Ask it, my husband, and then let us put this ugly business behind us for ever."

"Has any man save me," asked Quong, "ever gazed upon the three dimples that adorn your thighs?"

Quong held his breath, waiting for the reply.

"Before the Shrine of Truth," said Pearl of the Morning slowly, "I swear that no man save you, my husband, and that kind man over yonder"—she pointed towards the doctor—"has ever gazed upon the three dimples that adorn my thighs. If I lie in this matter, may the fate reserved for liars fall upon me."

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Quong's heart was too full for words. He hung his head in shame.

It was two hours before the trio arrived at Quong's houseboat. Here, waving aside all thanks, the doctor left them, proceeding on foot to the nearest town, where he had lodgings. When the houseboat was out of sight round a bend in the river, the doctor sat down on the river bank, and, with many grimaces of discomfort, removed the false beard he had been wearing.

"Ching," he said, looking at himself mirrored in the water, laughing as though his sides would burst, "I think I like you better thus, frank and unadorned by any hirsute growth. Indeed, now I am like Truth itself, which requires no embellishment."

★ ★ ★

SPORTING INSTINCT

Not long ago I was playing golf near London dressed in beige slacks, a sports coat, a plaid sweater, a cap, socks of outrageous hue and moccasin shoes. I decided to drop in at an exclusive gentlemen's tailor to buy some of those good English woollen suitings. I wanted to take them home and have my tailor make them up for me.

When I drove up to the shop and walked in, they took one look at me and whisked me into an inner room; a cubicle in the back. Obviously they didn't want their customers to see such a *gauche* derelict in their shop.

I said that I wanted to see some material. The salesman who waited on me was formal and starchy. He had on a wing collar, an Ascot tie and a cutaway. He began to lift down bolts of cloth and as he unwound a big bolt, a moth flew out.

"Consternation" is a weak word for what ensued. People rushed from all parts of the store and went after the fluttering interloper with rolled-up copies of *The Times*. I think that they were more perturbed than they'd ever been during the German blitzes. A moth invading a Bond Street tailoring establishment is nothing less than un-British. They were still spluttering and thinking up explanations when I left. I was glad to get away. It's embarrassing to witness the degradation and shame of a brave and friendly country.

BING CROSBY, *Call Me Lucky*

★ ★ ★

When you have finished reading this copy of ARGOSY, *why not pass it on to a member of H.M. Forces?*

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GREAT ASH OF GLASCOED

There was a sudden loud welt of sound, a sharp wrenching

by CLEDWYN HUGHES

THE great ash tree, that stood at the place where the farm lane from Glascoed joined the main road out of Wales, was old and famous. It had been planted, so it was said, by a Jacobean squire at the same time as the mulberry in the walled garden of the farm.

The mulberry gave its soft, delightful fruit in great profusion each year, and Joseph Pearce had, for the last fifty years, allowed the children from the village to come and eat as much as they could. He regarded the mulberry tree with some pride; but the true love of his heart was reserved for the great ash of Glascoed Farm.

It was indeed a cathedral of a tree; all through the seasons it had some beauty to give to the world.

Joseph Pearce was a widower and he lived alone at the farm; each week a niece came to do his washing and baking and pastry-making. The men on his farm respected him, for he was a fair master and a hard worker himself. They knew of their master's love for the ash and they, too, had a respect for this great tree. Old Oakes, who was the cowman, would look up at the ash and nod approvingly, as he walked by to the church on a Sunday. Young Johnny, the tractor-driver, had carved his initials on every roadside tree in the parish except on the bark of the mighty ash of Glascoed Farm.

Although he only vaguely realized it, this great tree was the thing which Joseph Pearce worshipped in this world as the visible symbol of his belief in God and the next. He was no man for church or chapel. He could not understand the need for stained glass and gold-embroidered cloth when there was the sun on the larches and the moon on the moving river. Contemplation of the great ash gave him an inward peace, and it was his habit to walk down the lane from his farm and stare at the tree whenever any worry of mind or disturbance of the world was about him.

Joseph Pearce had seen the old tree in all moods of weather and time. He had seen it when it was bare of leaves, with partridges taking shelter by the great bole and snow upon the

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meadows. He had seen it in leaf, full of movement as a ship in sail when there was a July gale coming from the foot-hills of Wales. He had seen its bud-time, and he had watched its leaves fall; he had known it under harsh sunlight, and saluted it when a silver moon rode through the sky.

The ash was the old man's church, and it had the advantage over stone and brick in that it was full of life and being. Even at such a great age it grew a little. And, each year, it went through the cycle of bud, and leaf, and fruit, and fall; each year, it dispersed its seeds to the wind and offered a bounty of life to the earth and the fields. In its time, it had thrown myriad little trees from itself, and yet had no tiredness, no withered branch. Joseph Pearce gave the great ash of Glascoed Farm the deep devotion of mysticism; a worship he described simply as —*having a look at the old ash.*

On that warm May morning all was tranquil at Glascoed Farm. Young Johnny had gone out with the tractor to the hay-cutting, and old Oakes was taking the cows to the pasture by the river. Joseph Pearce was alone; he was standing by the back door of his house, looking at the blue flying of the swallows, satisfying himself that the height of their movements promised heat for the harvest. Over the red peak of the tiles of the cow-house roof, he could see the smooth, green top of the great ash; its young leaves quiet against the misty shapes of the distant hills of Wales.

It was while he was watching the swallows and the top of the tree that he heard the clicking of the latch of the white gate that led from the yard to the lane.

Joseph Pearce looked that way.

A youth was coming over the old cobble-stones. A lock of his fair hair tossed up and down on his forehead, the sunlight shining through, taking away the golden colour and leaving only a whiteness. And he had blue eyes, made large and unreal by the thick lenses of gold-rimmed glasses.

He carried a surveyor's rod in one hand, and in the other the leather case of a measuring tape.

As soon as he saw the young man, the old farmer had a spear of fear inside him. Only once before had he had dealings with a man who carried a rod and a tape. That had been in the war, when the authorities had taken away part of one of his best arable fields on which to build a searchlight site.

The young man had confidence. He came, without hesitation, up to Joseph Pearce, clumped the staff on the cobbles with a ring of its steel tip, and called: "Mr. Pearce?"

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"That is me."

"I'm from the County Council."

"Oh."

The young man said no more but put a hand into an inner pocket and brought out a piece of parchment. Placing the staff and the tape carefully on the pig-killing table under the pear tree by the back door, he opened the parchment.

Even from a distance, the old farmer could see that it was a map, with blue and red and green lines. The youth handed it across. The sunlight shone through the material so that it was several moments before Joseph Pearce could see the shape of the lines and the meanings of markings.

The young surveyor from the County Council gave an impatient growl in his narrow neck and said, "This is a map of the alterations we are making to the main road."

"Oh, is it? I had heard you were going to spend a lot of money on the old road. It has served us all very well for fifty years."

"No use for modern traffic, Mr. Pearce. It's forming a bottle-neck by the river bridge. Too many bends and curves, that's the trouble."

"I see. You are going to straighten it out?"

"That's a part of the scheme, Mr. Pearce. But there's more to it than that."

"We shall miss the winds and the twists. It is a road of surprises from here to the village. We never know when the primrose will be out on the banks, or just when the honeysuckle will blossom on the bend by Watkin Jones's privy. And that old crab at the bend by the bridge, that is a sight when all the petals come down after a south wind. You will be taking away a good deal, young man."

"Times have altered, Mr. Pearce. Bends and banks were all right for horse traffic, but things are more speedy these days. You wouldn't like an accident to occur, would you?"

"The straighter the road the faster we shall all go. But have you no thought, you in the Surveyor's Department of the County Council, have you no thought for primroses and honeysuckle and the blossom of the crab-apple trees?"

The young man from the County Council smiled as he answered, "A man's journeying is more important than all those sort of things, Mr. Pearce."

"You believe that?"

The young man only nodded, and put his white hands together anxiously, like a priest at first Mass.

Joseph Pearce went on: "You are quite a philosopher."

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"You flatter me, Mr. Pearce, I am only a surveyor—the youngest this year to pass the Institute exams."

"I am not a man for exams and institutes."

There was a silence then between the fair-haired young man and Joseph Pearce. It was the old man who spoke next: "What is it you want with me?"

"You are not a student of plans, Mr. Pearce?"

The young surveyor pointed to the plan which the old farmer held.

"Well, Mr. Pearce, we are going to widen the road at the bottom of your lane. There is a large tree there. It cannot be left standing in the centre of the new part of the road. It will have to come down and . . ."

The surveyor paused, noting the horror on the old man's face. He anxiously put out a hand in the sunlight; but Joseph Pearce backed tighter against his own farmhouse wall so that the young man might not touch him.

The surveyor put his hand down, and asked: "Have I said something to upset you?"

Joseph Pearce wanted to laugh madly then, and throw his old cap in a taunt of emotion higher than the tosses of the swallows. This young man was so innocent of what he was doing. Joseph Pearce thought for a moment of trying to explain just what the old ash tree meant to him, but he understood that it would be like trying to explain the beauty of a cathedral to a dog. And so he only said: "I am very attached to that old tree."

"I'm sorry that it has to go, Mr. Pearce, but there is a fair cubic footage in that tree and you won't be out of pocket, that's certain."

"Cubic footage! Out of pocket! I hadn't really thought about it like that."

The young surveyor took back the plan, put it in his pocket, and then picked up his measuring tape and his rod from the pig-killing bench below the pear tree. He said, "Well, I must be getting along. You'll arrange to fell the ash, won't you? We want to start by the middle of June."

Joseph Pearce came away from the wall of the house: "Supposing—supposing that I don't see my way clear about taking the old ash down, what then?"

"I know you are a reasonable man, Mr. Pearce, and I'm sure you appreciate, like every other citizen, the powers of the County Council. If you absolutely refused to cut down the tree we should have to serve a compulsory felling order on you and—well, there we are. It would come down, anyway."

"Oh, I see. You have the law on your side?"

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"I suppose so, Mr. Pearce, but we like to be reasonable. That's why I'm here this morning."

"Thank you," replied Joseph Pearce.

"Well, good morning," said the young surveyor. He turned to walk away, hesitated, and then raised a hand with an awkward gesture and tried to smooth his fair hair level on his head. Then he spoke again, "I'm really very sorry about this, Mr. Pearce. But it's out of my hands. Progress is always like that, isn't it? Really, out of our hands."

Joseph Pearce answered almost gently, "It's not your fault that you don't understand."

"*Don't understand*, Mr. Pearce? How do you mean?"

"Oh, the primroses and the honeysuckle and the crab-apple blossom. But you're really too young, that's your trouble. You see, young man, there are some things for which there is no examination to show when you are qualified, and no institute either."

Joseph Pearce saw that the surveyor was puzzled, and added to reassure him: "Don't worry about me. You go back to your office."

The young man walked away, and the old farmer calmly watched him go. The swallows were flying high, and the top branches of the great ash tree seen above the farm buildings were starting to move a little in the wind which came always with the heat in May.

That afternoon, Joseph Pearce spoke to young Johnny and old Oakes, in the cool, long kitchen of Glascoed Farm. Johnny had finished the hay-cutting and old Oakes was going to spend the afternoon renewing the salt-licks before the ties in the cowhouse.

Joseph Pearce spoke to them quietly: "Well, boys, I have some news for you. I daresay you have heard talk how they are going to widen the road by the bottom of our lane?"

"I have," said Johnny. Old Oakes only nodded.

Joseph Pearce went on: "So that they can have room for the road, they want the old ash out of the way. This afternoon, I want you to start felling her."

There was silence after he had spoken. The only noise was the slow halting tick of the grandfather clock from the parlour beyond the door. Young Johnny, a lad of nineteen, looked rather fearfully at old Oakes, as if some queerness had come to their master. Oakes stood up from the table and said: "You are sure what you are saying, master? You want the fine old tree to go?"

"Get her down as soon as you can, boys. She'll come down gently. She'll not hurt you. She is not of that sort. Work all

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the evening, if needs be till dark, to get her down. I'll pay overtime."

Old Oakes shook his head. " I no wants overtime for felling her. 'Tis like working for the devil. You mean this, master? "

" I do. If we do not get her down, others will. I could not bear that."

Oakes seemed to understand then. He turned to Johnny. " Fetch the long rope from the tractor-shed and get as high as you can into the branches and anchor it there. We'll get her down in the field all right. You coming to help, master? "

" No. But when it's all over, just tell me."

Oakes nodded. Johnny went to fetch the rope, and the old cowman made plans to put a new edge on the long, cross-cut saw.

When his two helpers had gone from the house, Joseph Pearce climbed the oak stairs to his bedroom. There, from the safe in the corner where he kept the deeds of the house and his will, he took out a small brown box. It had once been given him by his niece at a Christmas, full of cigars. This box he carried down the steep stairs to the kitchen; there, he set it down among the uncleared crockery. That done, he sat by the kitchen fire and thought of summers and springs, winters and autumns that had come and gone, but had left their memory within him.

He must have slept for a while, for it was almost tea-time when he heard a banging on the back door of the house. Gathering together his thoughts about the morning that had gone, he went to the door.

It was the young surveyor again. He now had no tape and no levelling staff. He spoke quickly. " I was on my way back to the office and I just had to call in once more to say how sorry I am about this whole business, Mr. Pearce. It's no doing of mine, believe you me. There is a Highways Committee and they have decided about the road. It's simply that we have to obey instructions. I really hate causing upset. What you said about primroses and things has . . ."

The old farmer held up his hand, and spoke calmly. " There's nothing to be sorry about. I'm not upset at all at the tree having to go. You saw my two men at work there? They hope to get her down before nightfall, and that means fantastic labour. The old man, Oakes—he was once a timberman until he came to like tending cows and rearing cattle more than destroying trees."

" I expect that was why he was so bitter, Mr. Pearce, if you say he hates felling trees. As I left my car on the main road, he spat at me and said that felling this tree would be the death of you, seeing that you loved it like a daughter."

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The young surveyor drew back, his shadow swaying in the late afternoon sunlight. Joseph Pearce laughed and went on: " Don't be afraid. Come inside."

The young man went into the kitchen and the old farmer put him to sit on the opposite side of the dying fire. Then Joseph Pearce lifted up the small box of polished wood from the table, and placed it in the lap of the surveyor.

" Open that and see what's inside," said the old man.

The surveyor raised the lid. Inside were laid neatly several dozen ash-keys: the seeds with the winged outcrops on them. Each had a little ticket tied to a wing; each had a different year written on the label.

Amazed the young surveyor looked up. Joseph Pearce explained, " I thought that one day the old ash of Glascoed would have to go. She is very, very old, and maybe her heart is rotten at the core. If it was not the County Council, it might well be a great gale one winter's night. Against that sad day I have kept these seeds. What are seeds for, Mr. Surveyor? "

" To grow, to carry on the race, Mr. Pearce? "

" How right you are, young man. I shall plant some of these and they will grow."

Joseph Pearce reached across and picked out a seed. " 1953, that will be one I shall plant."

" You have foresight, Mr. Pearce," said the young surveyor.

The old man did not answer immediately, for there was a sudden great welt of sound from the warm world outside, a sharp wrenching.

Joseph Pearce stood up. He spoke almost gaily, " There she goes. They say old Oakes held the record for Britain as a speedy feller of trees."

The young surveyor closed the brown box and handed it back to Joseph Pearce. " You'll have to look after those, Mr. Pearce."

" I shall."

They went together to the door of the farmhouse. Joseph Pearce put an arm on the shoulder of the young man and asked, " Do you like mulberry fruit? "

" My little brother and sister would, I'm sure."

" Well, when the fruit is ready, I'll drop you a postcard at the County Offices and you must bring them along, with a basket—" Joseph Pearce paused, and smiled, and then went on— " with a basket, and their stomachs."

" Thanks so much. John is my name. John Wesley, like the preacher."

" Easy to remember." Joseph Pearce opened the door and let the young man go.

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Somehow, now that it was all over, they had little to say to each other. The farmer thought for a moment of trying to explain how the old ash tree was only a symbol, an outward sign of the life that throbbed the stars, and sent water from the earth to the spires of the mighty trees. But he knew that wisdom came only in small doses over a long life.

The young man would always now appreciate primroses on a bank, honeysuckle by a privy, and crab-apple blossom made dust by the wind. The day would come, perhaps soon, when he would stand and watch a great tree above the snow, or against the sun, and understand why there was such loveliness in a cantankerous world.

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DAMSELS IN DISPUTE

Not all these women descend to fisticuffs, but each one is in some sort of warfare with a member of her own sex. Who is the formidable lady?

Allow one point for spotting her, one for the author, and one for the source in each case, making a possible total of twenty-seven points.

The answers are on page 87.

1. *A graveyard was her battleground, a thigh-bone her weapon —and the blood streamed from Goody Brown's nose!*
2. *If a certain woman ever rides over her green again, she will knock off her bonnet and tread on it.*
3. *Though she is little she is fierce, and the taller lady feared for the safety of her eyes!*
4. *This fair lady tried to poison her rival with a cup of strong waters—but he would have been happy with either.*
5. *" Help! Help! She has stabbed me! " the girl called, and this evil witch-doctress was caught in her own trap.*
6. *Strange laughter, rolling eyes characterized this mad woman— and the young bride's veil was torn down the middle!*
7. *The evil Malecasta lay on the ground. The warlike Maid had triumphed again!*
8. *" You've robbed me of my 'usbind," and Mrs. Blakeston launched into the attack, but this bold girl gave as good as she got, and the crowd cheered.*
9. *She shook her so hard—that she turned into a kitten!*

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★ *This famous writer says of her re-creation of an actual New Zealand crime : " I have often thought I would like to use this case as the basis for a detective story but the material refuses to be tidied up into fiction. And I prefer it as it stands —it is too good to be anything but true ! "*

HOWARD'S HAND

by NGAIO MARSH

TRUTH may or may not be stranger than fiction: it is certainly less logical.

Consider the affair of the severed hand at Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1885.

Late in the afternoon of December 16th of that year, the Sergeant-on-duty at the Central Police Station was visited by two brothers and their respective small sons. They crowded into his office and, with an air of self-conscious achievement, slapped down a newspaper parcel on his desk. Their name, they said, was Godfrey.

The Sergeant unwrapped the parcel. He disclosed, nestling unattractively in folds of damp newsprint, a human hand. It was wrinkled and pallid like the hand of a laundress on washing-day. On the third finger was a gold ring. It was a left hand.

The Godfreys, brothers and progeny, made a joint announcement.

" That's Howard's hand," they said in unison and they added, in explanation: " bit off by a shark."

They looked meaningly at a bill pasted on the wall of the police office. The bill gave a description of one Arthur Howard and offered a reward for information as to his whereabouts. The Godfreys also produced an advertisement in the daily paper of October 14th.

> *£50 Reward. Re Arthur Howard, drowned at Sumner on Saturday last. The above reward will be given for the recovery of the body or the first portion received thereof recognizable. Apply Times Office."*

The Sergeant looked at the hand and at the Godfreys. " I'll trouble you," he said, " for a statement."

They were ready enough to make a statement. They had spent the day, it seemed, at Taylor's Mistake. This lonely bay was not far from the seaside resort of Sumner where Arthur

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Rannage Howard had been reported drowned on October 10th. At about two o'clock in the afternoon the Godfreys had seen the hand lying as flat as a crab in the sand and seaweed below high-water mark. They had remarked that it was doubtless Howard's hand and had made it into a neat parcel.

They had then returned, with unimpaired relish to their picnic and had driven back to Christchurch in the late afternoon, more than content with their somewhat rococo day's outing. Elisha, the elder brother, begged the Sergeant to examine the ring. The Sergeant drew it off the cold wrinkled finger. On the inside were the initials A.H.

The Sergeant replaced the ring and reported the affair to his superior officer. The Godfreys were sent away without a reward and with their conception of the mechanics of British justice considerably modified.

From that moment until the day of their trial they were kept under observation by the police.

A few days later the Sergeant called upon Mrs. Sarah Howard. In his case he carried a newspaper parcel. Mrs. Howard received him in the parlour of her red brick cottage. He prepared her as best he could for what was to come, produced the parcel, and displayed the hand. She cried out that it was her husband's, burst into a storm of tears, and finally crashed into genuine hysterics.

The Sergeant returned with the hand to the Police Station.

A coroner's inquest was held on the hand. Three insurance companies were represented. If the hand was Howard's hand they were due to pay out, on three life policies, sums amounting to £2,400. The policies had all been transferred into the name of Sarah Howard, the wife, and so she, too, was much concerned with the outcome of the inquest.

The circumstances of what the coroner called "the alleged accident" were gone over in detail at the inquest. It appeared that on October 10th, 1885, Arthur Howard, railway workshop fitter, married, had walked from Christchurch to Sumner. On his way he fell in with other foot-sloggers who remembered his clothes and his silver watch on a gold chain and that he had said he meant to go for a swim at Sumner where, in those days, the waters were shark-infested.

The next morning a small boy had found his clothes and his watch on the end of the pier. A few days later insurance had been applied for and refused, the advertisement had been inserted in the paper, and, like an answer to the widow's prayer, the Godfreys, on December 16th, had discovered *the Hand*. So it appeared at the inquest.

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But there also appeared the report of no less than ten doctors, who had examined the hand. The doctors, after the manner of experts, disagreed in detail but, in substance, agreed upon three points. The hand had not lain long in the sea. Contrary to the suggestions of the brothers Godfrey, it had not been bitten off by a shark but severed by the teeth of a hacksaw. And the hand was not the hand of a man but that of a woman.

This damaging report was followed by a statement from an engraver. The initials A.H. on the inside of the ring had not been made by a professional's tool but had been scratched by some amateur.

After the inquest the interest of the police in the brothers Godfrey was intensified. They were pulled in and asked if, in view of the evidence, they would care to make a further statement.

Elisha Godfrey then made what must have struck the police as one of the most impertinently unlikely depositions in the annals of investigation. Elisha said that in his former statement he had withheld certain information which he would now divulge. One can hear the Sergeant's scandalized pen scratching it out. Elisha said that he and his brother had been sitting on the sands when, from behind a boulder, there appeared a man wearing goggles and a red wig and saying: "My God, come here, there's a man's hand on the beach."

Elisha and his brother were then shown the hand, and Elisha had made his punctual pronouncement. "That's Howard's hand," he had said. The goggles and wig had then said: "Poor fellow! Poor fellow!"

At this juncture the police might well have asked with classic scepticism: "And what did the hand say?" However, they merely looked coldly at the Godfreys. "Why didn't you tell us before about this chap in the goggles and wig?" they asked.

"Because," said Elisha, "he begged of me to promise I wouldn't let anyone know he was there."

"Why? Didn't he want to claim the reward?"

"He said he had plenty of money and didn't need it. He gave me the hand and went away."

"Did he raise his wig when he said good-bye?"

"No, he didn't," said Elisha, stung by this jeer. "He came back later in the day and kept begging me not to let on to anyone he was there."

"Read it through," said authority, wearily shoving the statement across to Elisha. "And if you've still got the nerve, sign it."

The Godfreys read it through and angrily signed it. They went away filled, it appeared, with righteous indignation and were watched even more closely by the authorities.

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The police, in the execution of their duty, made routine inquiries for information about a gentleman in goggles and red wig in the vicinity of Sumner and Taylor's Mistake on the day in question.

To their intense astonishment they got what they asked for. Several persons came forward saying that they had been accosted by this antic figure who excitedly showed them a paper with the Godfreys' name and address on it, and told them that they had found Howard's hand and had asked him to warn the police.

Was it possible that Elisha himself or the silent brother had put on the wig-and-goggles act? Where was the woman from whose arm the hand had been hacked? Had the police to look for a murderer or a cheat? They stepped up their inquiries and extended them from the South to the North Island of New Zealand. The result was a spate of information.

The man had been seen on the night of the alleged drowning, going north in the ferry steamer. He had been run in for insulting a woman who had afterwards refused to charge him. He had taken jobs on various farms.

Most strangely, he had appeared at dawn by the bedside of a fellow worker and had tried to persuade this man to open up a grave with him. His name, he had said, was Watt. Finally, and conclusively, it appeared that on the 18th of December the goggles and wig had gone for a long walk with Mrs. Sarah Howard.

Upon this information, the police arrested both the Godfrey brothers and Mrs. Howard on a charge of attempting to defraud the insurance companies.

The brothers professed astonishment, bewilderment, and a certain sheepish confusion. Mrs. Howard again took refuge in hysterics.

But a more dramatic arrest was made in a drab suburb of the capital city. Here the police ran to earth a figure like a Guy Fawkes, in clothes too big for him, and wearing goggles and a red wig. When these were removed, the person of Arthur Rannage Howard was at last discovered.

At the trial a very rattled jury found the Godfreys and Mrs. Howard not guilty on both counts and Howard guilty on the second count of attempting to obtain money by fraud.

So far everything ties up quite neatly. What won't make sense is the undisputed fact that Howard did his best to *look* like a disguised man.

No clue has ever been produced as to the owner of the hand. Of eight graves that were subsequently opened in search for the body to match the hand, none contained a dismembered body.

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But the hand had been hacked off by an amateur. Could Howard have bribed a dissecting-room janitor or enlisted the help of some undertaker's assistant? And if, as seemed certain, it was a woman's hand, where was the rest of the woman?

Then there is Howard's extraordinary masquerade. Why make himself so grotesquely conspicuous? Why blaze a trail all over the country? Did his project go a little to his head? Was he, after all, a victim of the artistic temperament?

The late Mr. Justice Alpers records that Howard's solicitor told him that he knew the answer. But soon after this the solicitor died and with him, finally, the secret of Howard's (alleged) hand.

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FLYING OFF THE HANDLE!

As we entered White's, the hall porter handed me a telegram: *Report forthwith to Commanding Officer Second Battalion the Tower of London. Regimental Adjutant Scots Guards.*

I gasped in horror at my youthful thoughtlessness. I had completely forgotten that I was a commissioned officer in His Majesty's most glorious Third Regiment of Foot Guards, and had made something of a record by joining two different regiments at once. Strangely enough I never heard any more of my improper enlistment in the H.A.C.; nor was my conduct ever called in question.

I hastened home from White's and telephoned a friend of mine in the Brigade to ask in which of the many uniforms affected by the Foot Guards I should attire myself. Following instructions, I proceeded to don as best I could that complicated blue garment known in the household regiments as a frock-coat. All, apparently, went well. Within a short space of time I arrived at the Tower in a taxi and a bath of perspiration. I was met by my old friend Cocky Dundonald, whom I had known since we were small boys together at Pincoff's school in Folkestone, and he conducted me to the Adjutant's office.

The Adjutant was a very severe Scotsman called Lord Dalrymple. His Lordship's warm smile of welcome froze into a glare of stupefied horror as his eyes were irresistibly drawn to my left hip. There, unnoticed by myself, was my sword handle jauntily facing the wrong way round . . . With a world of hurt in his voice, as if it were painful for him to speak at all, and after one more withering glance at my misplaced weapon, there came from Lord Dalrymple, in weak tones and an appropriate gesture: "Take it away, Cocky. Take it away. And have it dressed, man. Have it dressed . . ."

LORD GRANTLEY, *Silver Spoon*

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HOMAGE TO HOLMES

My only drug is a good long slug
Of Tincture of Conan Doyle

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

Centenary Greetings—

He was a tall, gaunt man of sixty, with clear-cut features and a small goatee beard which gave him a general resemblance to the caricatures of Uncle Sam. *2nd August*, 1914

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, *His Last Bow*

To Sherlock Holmes—

In height he was rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. His eyes were sharp and piercing, save during the intervals of torpor to which I have alluded; and his thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination. His hands were invariably blotted with ink and stained with chemicals, yet he was possessed of extraordinary delicacy of touch . . .

A Study in Scarlet

And our Dear Watson

" Now, Watson," said Holmes, as a tall dog-cart dashed up through the gloom, throwing out two golden tunnels of yellow light from its side-lanterns, " you'll come with me, won't you? "

The Man with the Twisted Lip

—Moriarty Notwithstanding—

Already the doors had been shut and the whistle blown, when— " My dear Watson," said a voice, " you have not even condescended to say good morning."

I turned in uncontrollable astonishment. The aged ecclesiastic had turned his face towards me. For an instant the wrinkles

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were smoothed away, the nose drew away from the chin, the lower lip ceased to protrude and the mouth to mumble, the dull eyes regained their fire, the drooping figure expanded. The next the whole frame collapsed, and Holmes had gone as quickly as he had come.

" Good heavens! " I cried. " How you startled me! "

" Every precaution is still necessary," he whispered. " I have reason to think that they are hot upon our trail. Ah, there is Moriarty himself."

The train had already begun to move as Holmes spoke. Glancing back I saw a tall man pushing his way furiously through the crowd and waving his hand as if he desired to have the train stopped. It was too late, however, for we were rapidly gathering momentum, and an instant later had shot clear of the station.

" With all our precautions, you see that we have cut it rather fine," said Holmes, laughing. He rose, and throwing off the black cassock and hat which had formed his disguise, he packed them away in a hand-bag.

" Have you seen the morning paper, Watson? "

" No."

" You haven't seen about Baker Street, then? "

" Baker Street? "

" They set fire to our rooms last night. No great harm was done."

" Good heavens, Holmes! This is intolerable."

The Final Problem

Hot on the Trail—

Now let us see Holmes at work. We all know how brisk he becomes at the appearance of a client; how, according to the inimitable phrase in the Reminiscences: " Holmes sat up in his chair and took his pipe out of his mouth like a hound that has heard the View Halloo." We have seen him in the mind's eye prowling round the room with his nose an inch from the ground, on the look-out for cigarette-ends, orange-peel, false teeth, domes of silence, and what not, that may have been left behind by the criminal. " It is not a man," says M. Binsk, the great Polish critic, " it is either a beast or a god."

RONALD A. KNOX, *Essays in Satire*

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Of an Infamous Villain—

"Ha! You put me off, do you?" said our new visitor [Dr. Grimesby Roylott], taking a step forward, and shaking his hunting-crop. "I know you, you scoundrel! I have heard of you before. You are Holmes the meddler." My friend smiled. "Holmes the busybody!" His smile broadened. "Holmes the Scotland Yard jack-in-office." Holmes chuckled heartily. "Your conversation is most entertaining," said he. "When you go out close the door, for there is a decided draught."

"I will go when I have had my say. Don't you dare to meddle with my affairs. I know that Miss Stoner has been here—I traced her! I am a dangerous man to fall foul of! See here." He stepped swiftly forward, seized the poker, and bent it into a curve with his huge brown hands. "See that you keep yourself out of my grip," he snarled, and hurling the twisted poker into the fireplace, he strode out of the room.

"He seems a very amiable person," said Holmes, laughing. "I am not quite so bulky, but if he had remained I might have shown him that my grip was not much more feeble than his own." As he spoke he picked up the steel poker, and with a sudden effort straightened it out again.

The Speckled Band

And Concluding a Case—

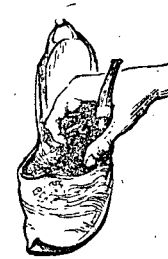
"*I am sure, Mr. Holmes, that we are very much indebted to you for having cleared the matter up. I wish I knew how you reached your results.*"

"*I reached this one,*" *said my friend,* "*by sitting upon five pillows and consuming an ounce of shag. I think, Watson, that if we drive to Baker Street we shall just be in time for breakfast.*"

The Man with the Twisted Lip

At 221b, *with Mrs. Hudson!*

The old landmarks were all in their places. There were the chemical corner and the acid-stained deal-topped table. There upon a shelf was the row of formidable scrap-books and books of reference which many of our fellow-citizens would have been so glad to burn. The diagrams, the violin-case, and the pipe-rack—even the Persian slipper which contained the tobacco—all met my eye as I glanced round me.



The Empty House

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AFRICAN TROUBADOUR

I could hear the throb of war-drums, the crackle of fire

by AMBROSE COGHILL

ONE day when work was over, Shadrach Odundo, my interpreter, told me that there was a travelling musician in the camp and that he would like to give a performance. I had been told of these troubadours but I had never met one. They wander the country as the spirit moves them, giving recitals, and are in great demand at weddings and funerals. Some of their songs are traditional, but for the most part both words and music are improvised according to the nature of the occasion.

The instrument they play is called a thoum and is an odd mixture of harp and guitar. At one end is the sound-box which is made from one half of a large gourd. From this there extend two divergent arms of wood from two and a half to three feet long, joined together at their farther ends by a wooden cross-piece. There are about eighteen strings tied to the cross-piece and these stretch down to the centre of the gourd. While it is being played, the gourd rests on the ground or in the lap of the performer with one of the wooden arms resting on his left shoulder and the strings are plucked like those of a harp.

I had heard that it was well worth listening to these troubadours and so I gladly gave permission, saying that I too would like to come and listen to him. Unfortunately, rain had set in with a threat of permanence and so the performance had to be given in the Camp police hut, which was rather larger than any of the others.

When I got there after supper the hut was packed to suffocation with visitors, mostly near neighbours, all men. The women, of course, had to stay outside. There was a small open space in the middle of the hut, and on the edge of this, beside Shadrach's chair, was one for me. The audience were squatting on the ground or on each other. A small oil hurricane lamp was hung on a nail in one of the uprights of the hut and threw a dim light on the shiny black faces. The atmosphere was that of a Turkish bath, hazy with the smoke of cheap cigarettes and pungent native tobacco. Conversation rioted with everybody talking passionately to everybody else, as though they hadn't met for years.

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There was a sudden scuffle at the door of the hut and this genial hubbub stopped abruptly.

A black female head poked in and said, "Gibiro!"—They come!

All eyes turned to the doorway.. First came a little boy of about seven, carrying a lamp. He came in, full of the pride of office, and sat down at my feet, putting the lamp beside him. Next he removed his only covering, the skin of a goat, and placed it reverently, hairy side up, on the floor before him. The stage was set.

All eyes turned again to the low doorway. Through it a chair suddenly appeared, apparently in a state of levitation, quickly followed by a purple fez, tassel first, and then the stooping figure of a man appeared, dressed in European clothes.

Following close on him and touching him lightly with one hand in the back, came a small middle-aged man. This was the Troubadour himself. He had a shrivelled foot and limped slightly. Round his shoulders was draped a green shawl, which hung over a pair of khaki shorts. As he came into the lamplight I saw that he was blind, but his face had a gentle, far-away expression, and one felt that though his maimed body lived in darkness, he himself lived in a world where there was beauty and light and song.

The man carrying the chair placed it in the open space and sat down. Then he gently guided the blind man to the goatskin and eased him down on it. The little boy removed the green shawl from the artist's bare shoulders and produced an anklet of iron native-made bells, which looked like a string of mussels. These he fastened round the blind man's good ankle. From somewhere the thoum was produced and handed to the Troubadour.

As soon as he had tuned it, he sat quite still for a minute or so, and there was an expectant hush over the room. Then, quietly, he started thrumming on the strings and beating time with his braceleted foot, making the bells jangle sharply.

Every now and then, humming to himself, he would change the rhythm, and at last, having found a rhythm which pleased him, the bells on his feet rang louder and more insistently; his fingers, now sure of the tune and the rhythm, plucked at the strings with lightning speed; and then, all of a sudden, he started his song with a paralysing yell which turned into a long-drawn minor cadenza through his nose.

Then came the song itself. Words gushed from him in a torrent, tumbling out, pouring over each other in wild, passionate spate; on, on, faster and faster, with scarcely a pause save for

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quick gasps for breath. I was gripped in an incredulous awe. It did not seem possible.

The man in the purple fez was sitting opposite to him and was his chorus. With his eyes half closed, he swayed his head from side to side, an expression of unutterable melancholy on his face and every now and again with a long-drawn-out *eeeeeee*, he would pick up some phrase in a minor key which the singer had just sung and, without words, elaborate it, and weave it contrapuntally into the song as it went on. He had a soft tenor voice in contrast with that of the Troubadour, which was raucous and grating. Oddly, one did not seem to notice this in the intensity of his performance.

The beat got quicker and quicker, the throbbing and thrumming got wilder and wilder, and the harpist's fingers were moving so fast that they were an almost invisible blur. All round the hut heads were bobbing, shoulders jerking, and eyes rolling. The basic and very complicated rhythm never altered except to grow quicker, and with this as background, the player wove the most intricate and superlatively syncopated variations on his strings.

The sweat poured off him, and every now and then the little boy seized him with one hand by the nape of the neck and rubbed his face, neck, and chest dry with the green shawl, but never for an instant did the throbbing of the rhythm or the song falter. Sometimes the player would stop singing words and—how he did it I cannot imagine—produce the most astonishing vocal pizzicato in imitation of his instrument.

The song went on and on, the words cascading from the singer; the notes leapt from the thoum like the sparks of St. Elmo's Fire; the player was in a frenzy of composition, his fingers now but a brown blur. The audience were swept away with excitement, their eyes protruded like golf balls, their mouths hung half open; they swayed together to and fro in ecstasy, their dim forms glistening slightly in the smoke and semi-darkness. Alone the man in the fez showed no emotion other than his original look of profound misery as he swayed gently and joined antiphonally in the song.

I confess that although I could not understand a word of it all, I was gripping the arms of my chair with excitement. I kept wondering what splendid saga of tribal valour, of battles, rapine, and stirring deeds I was missing. I could imagine the sunlight glinting on spears red with blood, see the gaily painted shields, the ostrich-feather head-dresses bobbing above war-paint of white and ochre, hear the throb of the war-drums, the exultant yells of the victorious warriors, the screams of the wounded and dying, the crackle of fire as thatched huts went up in flames—

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And then suddenly it stopped. It was like switching off a light. To my untrained ear there had been no hint that the song was coming to an end. For a moment silence hung in the air like a bubble, and then with a crash of rapturous applause it was shattered. How that audience applauded! They clapped their hands, they clapped each other's bare backs, they yelled and rolled about on the floor.

The artist—and what an artist he was—leaned back against the wooden pillar, panting, his unseeing eyes half closed and his body dripping with sweat. The little boy wiped him dry and gave him a drink of water from a little gourd. The man in the fez, his face as melancholy as ever, produced a gourd split in half and held it out for offerings.

The money rained in and it was amusing to note that some of the most generous contributors were those who earlier in the day had pleaded heart-rending poverty when it had been a matter of paying their hut tax.

The night air was blessedly fresh and crisp as Shadrach and I emerged from the hut. The rain had stopped and the sky had cleared. A full moon helped us to avoid the puddles. We walked a little way in silence, I with my whole being drenched in the wild, throbbing music and the stirring sound of the words.

I turned to Shadrach. "Shadrach," I said, "was that song an old tribal song about war and battles of long ago?"

"That an old tribal song?" said Shadrach, mildly amused. "Oh no, bwana, just an ordinary song that he was making up as he went along."

"What, then, was it all about?" I asked.

"Oh," he answered carelessly, "it was about some man who lost a cow."

Then he added happily, "But he found her again."

★ ★ ★

THE PLATYPUS

I like the duck-billed platypus
Because it is anomalous.
I like the way it raises its family,
Partly birdly, partly mammaly.
I like its independent attitude.
Let no one call it a duck-billed platitude.

OGDEN NASH, *The Private Dining-Room*

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★ SCIENCE FICTION CHOICE

THIRTY SECONDS, THIRTY DAYS

The oldest terror of the spaceways gripped him by the throat

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

GRANT was writing up the *Star Queen*'s log when he heard the cabin door opening behind him. He didn't bother to look round—there was only one other man aboard the ship. But when nothing happened and McNeil neither spoke nor came into the room, the long silence finally roused Grant's curiosity, and he swung the seat round in its gimbals.

McNeil was just standing in the doorway, looking as if he had seen a ghost. The trite metaphor flashed into Grant's mind instantly. He did not know for a moment how near the truth it was. In a sense McNeil had seen a ghost—the most terrifying of all ghosts—his own.

"What's the matter?" said Grant angrily. "You sick or something?"

The engineer shook his head. Grant noticed the little beads of sweat that broke away from his forehead and went glittering across the room on their perfectly straight trajectories. His throat muscles moved, but for a while no sound came. It looked as if he were going to cry. "We're done for," he whispered at last. "Oxygen reserve's gone."

Then he did cry. He looked like a flabby doll, slowly collapsing on itself. He couldn't fall, for there was no gravity, so he just folded up in mid-air.

Grant said nothing. Already the air seemed to be thickening around him as the oldest terror of the spaceways gripped him by the throat.

He slowly loosened the elastic straps, which, while he was seated, gave some illusion of weight, and with an automatic skill he launched himself towards the doorway. McNeil did not offer to follow. Even making every allowance for the shock he had undergone, Grant felt that he was behaving very badly.

The hold was a large hemispherical room with a thick central column that carried the controls and cabling to the other half of the dumb-bell-shaped spaceship a hundred yards away. It was

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packed with crates and boxes arranged in a surrealistic three-dimensional array that made very few concessions to gravity.

But even if the cargo had suddenly vanished, Grant would scarcely have noticed. He had eyes only for the big oxygen tank, taller than himself, which was bolted against the wall near the inner door of the air-lock.

It was just as he had last seen it, gleaming with aluminium paint, and the metal sides still held the faint touch of coldness that gave the only hint of their contents. All the piping seemed in perfect condition. There was no sign of anything wrong apart from one minor detail. The needle of the contents gauge lay mutely against the zero stop.

When Grant got back to the control room McNeil was himself again. A glance at the opened medicine chest showed the reason for the engineer's rapid recovery.

"It was a meteor," he said.

"But what about the alarms? The air pressure's normal—how could we have been holed?"

"We weren't," McNeil replied. "You know how the oxygen circulates nightside through the refrigerating coils to keep it liquid? The meteor must have smashed them and the stuff simply boiled away."

Grant was silent, collecting his thoughts. What had happened was serious—deadly serious—but it need not be fatal. After all, the voyage was more than three-quarters over.

"Surely the regenerator can keep the air breathable, even if it does get pretty thick?" he asked hopefully.

McNeil shook his head. "I haven't worked it out in detail, but I know the answer. When the carbon dioxide is broken down and the free oxygen gets cycled back there's a loss of about ten per cent. That's why we have to carry a reserve."

"The spacesuits!" cried Grant in sudden excitement. "What about their tanks?"

He had spoken without thinking and the immediate realization of his mistake left him feeling worse than before.

"We can't keep oxygen in them—it would boil off in a few days. There's enough compressed gas there for about thirty minutes—merely long enough for you to get to the main tank in an emergency."

"There must be a way out, even if we have to jettison cargo and run for it. Let's stop guessing and work out exactly where we are."

Grant was as much angry as frightened. He was angry with McNeil for breaking down. He was angry with the designers of the ship for not having foreseen this multimillion-to-one chance.

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The dead-line might be a couple of weeks away and a lot could happen before then.

Grant strapped himself in the pilot's seat and pulled out a writing-pad.

"Let's get the facts right," he said with artificial calmness. "We've got the air that's still circulating in the ship and we lose ten per cent of the oxygen every time it goes through the regenerator. Chuck me over the Manual, will you? I can never remember how many cubic metres we use a day."

In saying that the *Star Queen* might expect to be hit by a meteor once every century McNeil had grossly but unavoidably oversimplified the problem. Everything depends, of course, on what one means by the word meteor. Each lump of cosmic slag that reaches the surface of Earth has a million smaller brethren who perish utterly in the no man's land where the atmosphere has not quite ended and space has yet to begin—that ghostly region where the weird Aurora sometimes walks by night.

There are the familiar shooting stars, seldom larger than a pin's head, and these in turn are outnumbered a millionfold again by particles too small to leave any visible trace of their dying as they drift down from the sky. All of them are meteors. For the purposes of space-flight, however, a meteor is of interest only if, on penetrating the hull of a ship, it leaves a hole large enough to be dangerous. This is a matter of relative speeds as well as size.

That which had struck the *Star Queen* was a giant. However, things might have been worse. The *Star Queen* was 115 days on her orbit and had only 30 still to go. She was travelling, as did all freighters, on the long tangential ellipse kissing the orbits of Earth and Venus on opposite sides of the Sun. She followed her predetermined track like a tram, taking 145 days, more or less, for each journey.

Anything more unlike the early-twentieth-century idea of a spaceship than the *Star Queen* would be hard to imagine. She consisted of two spheres, one fifty and the other twenty metres in diameter, joined by a cylinder about a hundred metres long. Crew, cargo, and controls were in the larger sphere, while the smaller one held the atomic motors and was—to put it mildly—out of bounds to living matter.

The *Star Queen* had been built in space and could never have lifted herself even from the surface of the Moon. Hauling cargo up from the planets was the job of the powerful little chemical rockets. In a month the tugs would be climbing up from Venus to meet her, but the *Star Queen* would not be stopping for there would be no one at the controls. She would continue blindly on her orbit, speeding past Venus at miles a second, and five months

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later she would be back at the orbit of the Earth, though Earth itself would then be far away.

It is surprising how long it takes to do a simple addition when your life depends on the answer. Grant ran down the short column of figures half a dozen times before he finally gave up hope that the total would change. Then he sat doodling nervously on the white plastic of the pilot's desk.

"With all possible economies," he said, "we can last about twenty days. That means we'll be ten days out of Venus when—" His voice trailed off into silence.

Ten days didn't sound like much—but it might just as well have been ten years.

The spaceship that "happened to be passing" was, almost by definition, impossible. Even if other freighters had been coasting on the same elliptic path—and Grant knew there was none—then by the very laws that governed their movements they would always keep their original separations. It was not quite impossible that a liner, racing on its hyperbolic orbit, might pass within a few hundred thousand kilometres of them, but at a speed so great that it would be as inaccessible as Pluto.

"If we threw out the cargo," said McNeil at last, "would we have a chance of changing our orbit?"

Grant shook his head. "I'd hoped so," he replied, "but it won't work. We could reach Venus in a week, if we wished, but we'd have no fuel for braking and nothing from the planet could catch us as we went past."

"Not even a liner?"

"According to Lloyd's Register, Venus has only a couple of freighters at the moment."

"If we can't figure a way out," said McNeil, "maybe someone on Venus can. We'd better talk to them."

"I'm going to," Grant replied, "as soon as I've decided what to say. You go and get the transmitter aligned, will you?"

He watched McNeil as he floated out of the room. The engineer was probably going to give trouble in the days that lay ahead. Until now they had got on well enough—like most stout men, McNeil was good-natured and easy-going. But now Grant realized that he lacked fibre. He had become flabby, physically and mentally, through living too long in space.

A buzzer sounded on the transmitter switchboard. The parabolic mirror out on the hull was aimed at the gleaming arc-lamp of Venus, only ten million kilometres away and moving on an almost parallel path.

The automatic monitor on Venus gave its impersonal go-ahead signal and Grant began to talk steadily, and, he hoped, quite

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dispassionately. He gave a careful analysis of the situation and ended with a request for advice.

The reply from Venus, when it came at last, took nearly an hour to run through the recorder. It was a questionnaire so detailed that Grant wondered morosely if he'd live long enough to answer it. Most of the queries were technical ones concerning the ship. The experts on two planets were pooling their brains in an attempt to save the *Star Queen* and her cargo.

" Well, what do you think of it? " Grant asked McNeil when the other had finished running through the message. He was watching the engineer carefully for any further sign of strain.

There was a long pause before McNeil spoke. Then he shrugged his shoulders and his first words were an echo of Grant's own thoughts. " It will certainly keep us busy. I shan't be able to do all these tests in under a day. I can see what they're driving at most of the time, but some of the questions are just crazy." Grant had suspected that, but said nothing as the other continued: " Rate of hull leakage—that's sensible enough, but why should anyone want to know the efficiency of our radiation screening? I think they're trying to keep up our morale—or else they want to keep us too busy to worry."

There is a timelessness about space-flight that is unmatched by any other experience of man. Even on the Moon there are shadows that creep sluggishly from crag to crag as the Sun makes its slow march across the sky. Earthside, there is always the great clock of the spinning globe, marking the hours with continents for hands. But on a long voyage in a gyro-stabilized ship the same patterns of sunlight lie unmoving on wall or floor as the chronometer ticks off its meaningless hours and days.

Grant and McNeil had long since learnt to regulate their lives accordingly. In deep space they moved and thought with a leisure that would vanish quickly enough when a voyage neared its end and the time for braking manœuvres had arrived. Though they were now under sentence of death, they continued along the well-worn grooves of habit.

Every day Grant carefully wrote up the log, checked the ship's position, and carried out his various routine duties. McNeil was also behaving normally as far as could be told, though Grant suspected that some of the technical maintenance was being carried out with a very light hand.

On the fourth day Venus spoke again. Shorn of its technicalities, the message was nothing more or less than a funeral oration. Grant and McNeil had been written off but they were given elaborate instructions concerning the safety of the cargo.

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Back on Earth the astronomers were computing all the possible rescue orbits that might make contact with the *Star Queen* in the next few years. There was even a chance that she might be reached from Earth six or seven months later when she was back at aphelion.

McNeil vanished soon after this message came through. It was his turn to prepare the " evening " meal, a duty he enjoyed, for he took good care of his stomach. When the usual sounds from the galley were not forthcoming Grant went in search of his crew. He found McNeil lying in his bunk, very much at peace with the universe. Hanging in the air beside him was a large metal crate which had been roughly forced open.

There was no need to examine it closely to guess its contents. Grant stared at him with angry contempt but McNeil returned his gaze, unabashed.

" Oh, don't be a spoil-sport! Have some yourself—what does it matter now? " He pushed across a bottle and Grant fielded it deftly as it floated by. It was a fabulously valuable wine—he remembered the consignment now—and the contents of that small crate must be worth hundreds.

" I don't think there's any need," said Grant severely, " to behave like a pig, even in these circumstances."

McNeil wasn't drunk yet. He had only reached the brightly-lit ante-room of intoxication and had not lost all contact with the drab outer world.

" I am prepared," he said with great solemnity, " to listen to any good argument against my present course of action—a course that seems eminently sensible to me. But you'd better convince me quickly while I'm still amenable to reason." He pressed the plastic bulb again and a purple jet shot into his mouth.

" Apart from the fact that you're stealing company property which will certainly be salvaged sooner or later, you can hardly stay drunk for several weeks."

" That," said McNeil thoughtfully, " remains to be seen."

" I don't think so," retorted Grant. Bracing himself against the wall, he gave the crate a vicious shove that sent it flying through the open doorway. As he dived after it and slammed the door he heard McNeil shout, " Well, of all the dirty tricks! "

It would take the engineer some time, particularly in his present condition, to unbuckle himself and follow. Grant steered the crate back to the hold and locked the door.

McNeil was singing when, some time later, Grant went back past his room. He still had a couple of bottles for company and was shouting—*We don't care where the oxygen goes*
If it doesn't get into the wine . . .

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Grant, whose education had been severely technical, couldn't place the quotation. As he paused to listen he suddenly found himself shaken by an emotion which, to do him justice, he did not for a moment recognize. It passed as swiftly as it had come, leaving him sick and trembling. For the first time, he realized that his dislike of McNeil was slowly turning to hatred.

It is a fundamental rule of space-flight that, for sound psychological reasons, the minimum crew on a long journey shall consist of not less than three men. But rules are made to be broken, and the *Star Queen*'s owners had obtained full authority from the Board of Space Control and the insurance companies when the freighter set off for Venus without her regular captain.

At the last moment he had been taken ill and there was no replacement. Since the planets are disinclined to wait upon man and his affairs, if she did not sail on time she would not sail at all. Millions of dollars were involved, so she sailed. Grant and McNeil were both highly capable men and they had no objection at all to earning double their normal pay for very little extra work. Despite fundamental differences in temperament, they got on well enough in ordinary circumstances. It was nobody's fault that circumstances were now very far from ordinary.

The oxygen would last two men about twenty days, and Venus was thirty days away. One did not have to be a calculating prodigy to see at once that one man and one man only might yet live to walk the metal streets of Port Hesperus.

The acknowledged dead-line was twenty days ahead, but the unmentioned one was only ten days off. Until that time there would still be enough air for two men—and thereafter for one man only for the rest of the voyage.

It was obvious that the conspiracy of silence could not last much longer. But it is not easy, even at the best of times, for two people to decide amicably which one of them shall commit suicide. It is still more difficult when they are no longer on speaking terms.

Grant wanted to be fair. Therefore the only thing to do was to wait until McNeil sobered up and then to put the question to him frankly. He could think best at his desk, so he went to the control cabin and strapped himself down in the pilot's chair.

For a while he stared thoughtfully into nothingness. It would be better, he decided, to broach the matter by correspondence, especially while diplomatic relations were in their present state. He clipped a sheet of paper on the writing-pad and began, "Dear McNeil . . ." Then he tore it out and started again, "McNeil . . ."

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It took him the best part of three hours, and even then he wasn't wholly satisfied. But at last he managed to finish. He sealed the letter and locked it away in his safe. It could wait for a day or two.

He often wondered how McNeil was spending his time. The engineer had a large library of microfilm books, for he had read widely and his range of interests was unusual. His favourite book, Grant knew, was *Jurgen*, and perhaps even now he was trying to forget his doom by losing himself in its strange magic. Others of McNeil's books were less respectable and not a few were of the class curiously described as *curiosa*.

The truth of the matter was that McNeil was far too subtle and complicated a personality for Grant to understand. He was a hedonist and enjoyed the pleasures of life all the more for being cut off from them for months at a time. But he was by no means the moral weakling that the unimaginative and somewhat puritanical Grant had supposed. It was true that he had collapsed completely under the initial shock and that his behaviour over the wine was—by Grant's standards—reprehensible. But McNeil had had his breakdown and had recovered. Therein lay the difference between him and the hard but brittle Grant.

Grant had hoped that McNeil would himself broach the subject of suicide, thus sparing him a very awkward duty. When the engineer stubbornly refused to do anything of the sort it added to Grant's resentment and contempt. To make matters worse he was now suffering from nightmares and sleeping very badly.

The all-too-literal dead-line was only five days off when, for the first time, Grant's mind brushed lightly against the thought of murder. He had been sitting after the evening meal, trying to relax as McNeil clattered around in the galley with what Grant considered quite unnecessary noise.

What use, he asked himself, was the engineer to the world? He had no responsibilities and no family—no one would be any the worse off for his death. Grant, on the other hand, had a wife and three children of whom he was moderately fond, though for some obscure reason they responded with little more than dutiful affection. Any impartial judge would have no difficulty in deciding which of them should survive. If McNeil had a spark of decency in him he would have come to the same conclusion already. Since he appeared to have done nothing of the sort he had forfeited all further claims to consideration.

Such was the elemental logic of Grant's subconscious mind, which had arrived at its answer days before but had only now succeeded in attracting the attention for which it had been clamouring. To Grant's credit he at once rejected the thought with

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horror. He was an upright and honourable person with a very strict code of behaviour. Even the vagrant homicidal impulses of what is misleadingly called "normal" man had seldom ruffled his mind. But in the days—the very few days—left to him, they were to come more and more often.

The air had now become noticeably fouler. Though there was still no real difficulty in breathing, it was a constant reminder of what lay ahead, and Grant found that it kept him from sleeping. His nerve was also rapidly deteriorating, a state of affairs accentuated by the fact that McNeil seemed to be behaving with unexpected and annoying calmness. Grant realized that he had come to the stage when it would be dangerous to delay the showdown any longer.

McNeil was in his room as usual when Grant went up to the control cabin to collect the letter he had locked away in the safe. Resolutely he made his way towards McNeil's cabin.

A single neutron begins the chain reaction that in an instant can destroy a million lives and the toil of generations. Equally insignificant and unimportant are the trigger-events that can sometimes change a man's course of action and so alter the whole pattern of his future. Nothing could have been more trivial than that which made Grant pause in the corridor outside McNeil's room. In the ordinary way he would not even have noticed it. It was the smell of smoke—tobacco smoke.

The thought that the sybaritic engineer had so little self-control that he was squandering the last precious litres of oxygen in such a manner filled Grant with blinding fury. He stood for a moment quite paralysed with the intensity of his emotion.

Then, slowly, he crumpled the letter in his hand. The thought which had first been an unwelcomed intruder, then a casual speculation, was at last fully accepted. McNeil had had his chance and had proved, by his unbelievable selfishness, unworthy of it. Very well—he could die.

As it happened Grant was—not for the first time—badly misjudging McNeil. The engineer was a heavy smoker and tobacco was quite essential to his mental well-being, even in normal circumstances. How much more essential it was now, Grant, who smoked only occasionally and without much enjoyment, could never have appreciated.

McNeil had satisfied himself by careful calculation that four cigarettes a day would make no measurable difference whatsoever to the ship's oxygen endurance, whereas they would make all the difference in the world to his own nerves and hence indirectly to Grant's. But it was no use explaining this to Grant.

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So he had smoked in private and with a self-control he found agreeably, almost voluptuously surprising. It was sheer bad luck that Grant had detected one of the day's four cigarettes.

For a man who had only at that moment talked himself into murder, Grant's actions were remarkably methodical. Without hesitation he hurried back to the control room and opened the medicine chest with its neatly labelled compartments, designed for almost every emergency that could occur in space.

Even the ultimate emergency had been considered, for there behind its retaining elastic bands was the tiny bottle he had been seeking, the image of which through all these days had been lying hidden far down in the depths of his mind. It bore a white label printed with a skull-and-crossbones, and beneath them the words: Approx. one half-gramme will cause painless and instantaneous death.

Even more important was a fact unmentioned on the label. It was also tasteless.

The contrast between the meals prepared by Grant and those organized with considerable skill and care by McNeil was striking. Anyone who was fond of food and who spent a good deal of his life in space usually learnt the art of cooking in self-defence. McNeil had done this long ago.

To Grant, eating was one of those necessary but annoying jobs which had to be got through as quickly as possible. His cooking reflected this opinion, but McNeil had ceased to grumble about it. He would have been very interested in the trouble Grant was taking over this particular meal.

If he noticed any increasing nervousness on Grant's part as the meal progressed, he said nothing. They ate almost in silence, but that was not unusual for they had long since exhausted most of the possibilities for light conversation. When the last dishes—deep bowls with inturned rims to prevent the contents drifting out—had been cleared away, Grant went into the galley to prepare the coffee.

He was sure that, outwardly at least, he was quite calm as he carried in the two plastic containers and their drinking-tubes. There was no danger of confusing them, for the engineer's had the letters MAC painted boldly on it.

He watched, fascinated, without appearing to do so, as McNeil toyed with his cup. The engineer seemed in no great hurry and was staring moodily into space. Then he put his lips to the drinking-tube and sipped.

A moment later he sputtered slightly—and an icy hand seemed to seize Grant's heart and hold it tight. Then McNeil turned

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to him and said evenly, " You've made it properly for once. It's quite hot."

Slowly, Grant's heart resumed its interrupted work. He did not trust himself to speak but managed a non-committal nod. McNeil parked the cup carefully in the air, a few inches away from his face. He seemed very thoughtful, as if weighing his words for some important remark.

Grant cursed himself for having made the drink so hot—that was just the sort of detail that hanged murderers. If McNeil waited much longer Grant would probably betray himself through nervousness.

" I suppose," said McNeil in a quietly conversational way, " it has occurred to you that there's still enough air to last one of us to Venus? "

Grant forced his jangling nerves under control and tore his eyes away from that hypnotic cup. His throat seemed very dry as he answered, " It—it had crossed my mind."

McNeil touched his cup, found it still too hot, and continued thoughtfully, " Then wouldn't it be more sensible if one of us decided to walk out of the air-lock, say—or to take some of the poison in there? " He jerked his thumb towards the medicine chest, just visible from where they were sitting.

Grant nodded.

" The only trouble, of course," added the engineer, " is to decide which of us will be the unlucky one. I suppose it would have to be by picking a card or in some other quite arbitrary way."

Grant stared at McNeil with a fascination that almost outweighed his mounting nervousness. He had never believed that the engineer could discuss the subject so calmly. Grant was sure McNeil suspected nothing. Obviously, McNeil's thoughts had been running on parallel lines to his own and it was scarcely a coincidence that he had chosen this time, of all times, to raise the matter.

McNeil was watching him intently, as if judging his reactions.

" You're right," Grant heard himself say. " We must talk it over."

" Yes," said McNeil, quite impassively, " we must."

Then he reached for his cup again, put the drinking-tube to his lips and sucked slowly.

Grant could not wait until he had finished. To his surprise, the relief he had been expecting did not come. He even felt a stab of regret, though it was not quite remorse. It was a little late to think of it now, but he suddenly remembered that he would be alone in the *Star Queen*, haunted by his thoughts, for some time before rescue came.

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He did not wish to see McNeil die. Without another glance at his victim, he launched himself towards the exit.

Immovably fixed, the fierce sun and the unwinking stars looked down upon the *Star Queen*, which seemed as motionless as they. There was no way of telling that the tiny dumb-bell of the ship had now almost reached her maximum speed and that millions of horsepower were chained within the smaller sphere, waiting for the moment of release. There was no way of telling, indeed, that she carried any life at all.

An air-lock on the nightside of the ship slowly opened, letting a blaze of light escape from the interior. The brilliant circle looked very strange hanging there in the darkness. Then it was abruptly eclipsed as two figures floated out of the ship.

One was much bulkier than the other, and for a rather important reason—it was wearing a spacesuit. Now there are some forms of apparel that may be worn or discarded as the fancy pleases with no other ill effects than a possible loss of social prestige. But spacesuits are not among them.

Something not easy to follow was happening in the darkness. Then the smaller figure began to move, slowly at first but with rapidly mounting speed. It swept out of the shadow of the ship into the full blast of the sun, and now one could see that strapped to its back was a small gas-cylinder from which a fine mist was jetting to vanish almost instantly into space.

It was a crude but effective rocket. There was no danger that the ship's minute gravitational pull would drag the body back to it again. Rotating slightly, the corpse dwindled against the stars and vanished from sight in less than a minute.

The figure in the air-lock swung the portal shut, the circle of brilliance vanished, and only the pale Earthlight still glinted on the shadowed wall of the ship.

Nothing else whatsoever happened for twenty-three days.

The captain of the *Hercules* turned to his mate with a sigh of relief. "I was afraid he couldn't do it. It must have been a colossal job to break his orbit single-handed—with the air as thick as it must be by now. How soon can we get to him?"

"It will take about an hour. He's still got quite a bit of eccentricity, but we can correct that."

"Good. Signal *Leviathan* and *Titan* that we can make contact and ask them to take off, will you? But I wouldn't drop any tips to your news-commentator friends until we're safely locked."

The mate had the grace to blush. "I don't intend to," he said in a slightly hurt voice as he pecked delicately at the keys of his

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calculator. The answer that flashed instantly on the screen seemed to displease him.

"We'd better board and bring the *Queen* down to circular speed ourselves before we call the other tugs," he said. "Otherwise we'll all be wasting a lot of fuel. She's still got a velocity excess of nearly a kilometre a second."

"Good idea—tell *Leviathan* and *Titan* to stand by but not to blast until we give them the new orbit."

While the message was on its way down through the unbroken cloud-banks that covered half the sky below, the mate remarked thoughtfully, "I wonder what he's feeling like now?"

"I can tell you. He's so pleased to be alive that he doesn't give a hoot about anything else."

"Still, I'm not sure I'd like to have left my shipmate in space so that I could get home."

"It's not the sort of thing that anyone would like to do. But you heard the broadcast—they'd talked it over calmly and the loser went out by the air-lock. It was the only sensible way."

"Sensible, perhaps—but it's pretty horrible to let someone else sacrifice himself in such a cold-blooded way so that you can live."

"Don't be a sentimentalist. I'll bet that if it happened to us you'd push me out before I could say my prayers."

"Unless you did it to me first. Still, I don't think it's ever likely to happen to the *Hercules*. Five days out of port's the longest we've ever been, isn't it? Talk about the romance of the spaceways!"

The captain didn't reply. He was peering into the eyepiece of the navigating telescope, for the *Star Queen* should now be within optical range. There was a long pause while he adjusted the vernier controls. Then he gave a little sigh of satisfaction. "There she is—about nine-fifty kilometres away. Tell the crew to stand by—and send a message to cheer him up. Say we'll be there in thirty minutes, even if it isn't quite true."

Slowly the thousand-metre nylon ropes yielded beneath the strain as they absorbed the relative momentum of the ships, then slackened again as the *Star Queen* and the *Hercules* rebounded towards each other. The electric winches began to turn and like a spider crawling up its thread, the *Hercules* drew alongside the freighter.

Men in spacesuits sweated with heavy reaction units. The outer doors slid aside and the air in the locks mingled, fresh with foul. As the mate of the *Hercules* waited, oxygen cylinder in hand, he wondered what condition the survivor would be in. Then the *Star Queen*'s inner door slid open.

For a moment, the two men stood looking at each other across

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the short corridor that now connected the two air-locks. The mate was surprised and a little disappointed to find that he felt no particular sense of drama. He wished—for he was an incurable romantic—that he could think of something memorable to say, some phrase that would pass into history. But all he actually said was, " Well, McNeil, I'm pleased to see you."

Though he was considerably thinner and somewhat haggard, McNeil had stood the ordeal well. He breathed gratefully the blast of raw oxygen, and rejected the idea that he might like to lie down and sleep. As he explained, he had done very little but sleep for the past week to conserve air. The mate looked relieved. He had been afraid he might have to wait for the story.

The cargo was being trans-shipped and the other two tugs were climbing up from the great blinding crescent of Venus while McNeil retraced the events of the last few weeks and the mate made surreptitious notes. McNeil spoke quite calmly and impersonally; he invented nothing but he omitted a good deal. He had had three weeks in which to prepare his narrative and he did not think it had any flaws.

Grant had already reached the door when McNeil called softly after him, " What's the hurry? I thought we had something to discuss."

Grant grabbed at the doorway to halt his headlong flight. He turned slowly and stared unbelievingly at the engineer. McNeil should be already dead—but he was sitting quite comfortably, looking at him with a most peculiar expression.

" Sit down," he said sharply—and in that moment it suddenly seemed that all authority had passed to him. Grant did so, quite without volition. Something had gone wrong, though what it was he could not imagine.

The silence in the control room seemed to last for ages. Then McNeil said rather sadly, " I'd hoped better of you, Grant."

At last Grant found his voice, though he could barely recognize it. " What do you mean? " he whispered.

" What do you think I mean? " retorted McNeil, with what seemed no more than mild irritation. " This little attempt of yours to poison me, of course."

Grant's tottering world had collapsed at last, but he no longer cared greatly one way or the other. McNeil began to examine his nails with some attention. " As a matter of interest," he said, " when did you decide to kill me? "

The sense of unreality was so overwhelming that Grant felt he was acting a part, that this had nothing to do with reality at all.

" Only this morning," he said, and he believed it.

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" Hmm," remarked McNeil, obviously without much conviction. He rose to his feet and moved over to the medicine chest. Grant's eyes followed him as he fumbled in the compartment and came back with the little poison bottle. It still appeared to be full. Grant had been careful about that.

" I suppose I should get pretty mad about this whole business," McNeil continued conversationally, holding the bottle between thumb and forefinger. " But somehow I'm not. Maybe it's because I saw it coming a long time ago."

" You—saw it coming? "

" Heavens, yes! You're too transparent to make a good criminal, I'm afraid. And now that your little plot's failed it leaves us both in an embarrassing position, doesn't it? "

To this masterly understatement there seemed no possible reply.

" By rights," continued the engineer thoughtfully, " I should now work myself into a flaming temper, call Venus Central, and denounce you to the authorities. But it would be a rather pointless thing to do, and I've never been much good at losing my temper anyway. Of course, you'll say that's because I'm too lazy—but I don't think so."

He gave Grant a twisted smile. " Oh, I know what you think about me—I'm soft and self-indulgent, I haven't any moral courage—or any morals, for that matter—and I don't give a damn for anyone but myself. Well, I'm not denying it. Maybe it's ninety per cent true. But the odd ten per cent is mighty important, Grant! "

Grant felt in no condition to indulge in psychological analysis; besides he was still obsessed with the problem of his failure and the mystery of McNeil's continued existence. McNeil, who knew this perfectly well, seemed in no hurry to satisfy his curiosity.

" Well, what do you intend to do now? " Grant asked, anxious to get it over.

" I should like," said McNeil calmly, " to carry on our discussion from where it was interrupted by the coffee."

" You don't mean—"

" But I do. Just as if nothing had happened."

" That doesn't make sense. You've got something up your sleeve! " cried Grant.

McNeil sighed. He put down the poison bottle and looked firmly at Grant. " You're in no position to accuse me of plotting anything. To repeat my earlier remarks, I am suggesting that we decide which one of us shall take the poison—only we don't want any more unilateral decisions. Also—" he picked up the bottle again—" it will be the real thing this time. The stuff in here merely leaves a bad taste in the mouth."

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A light was beginning to dawn in Grant's mind. "You changed the poison!"

"Naturally. You may think you're a good actor, Grant, but frankly—from the stalls—I thought the performance stank. I could tell you were plotting something, probably before you knew it yourself. In the last few days I've combed the ship pretty thoroughly. Thinking of all the ways you might have done me in was quite amusing and helped to pass the time. The poison was so obvious that it was the first thing I dealt with. But I rather overdid the danger signals when I took the first sip. Alum doesn't go at all well with coffee."

He gave that wry grin again. "Also, I'd hoped for something more subtle. So far I've found fifteen infallible ways of murdering anyone on board a spaceship. But I don't propose to describe them now."

This was fantastic, Grant thought. He was being treated not like a criminal, but like a rather stupid schoolboy who hadn't done his homework properly. "Yet you're still willing to start all over again? And you'd take the poison yourself if you lost?"

McNeil was silent for a long time. Then he began, slowly, "I can see that you still don't believe me. It doesn't fit into your tidy little picture, does it? But perhaps I can make you understand. It's really quite simple.

"I've enjoyed life, Grant, without many scruples or regrets—but the better part of it's over now and I don't cling to what's left as desperately as you might imagine. Yet while I am alive I'm rather particular about some things. It may surprise you to know that I've got any ideals at all. But I have, Grant—I've always tried to act like a civilized, rational being. I've not always succeeded. When I've failed I've tried to redeem myself."

He paused, and when he resumed it was as though he and not Grant was on the defensive. "I've never liked you, Grant, but I've often admired you. That's why I'm sorry it's come to this. I admired you most the day the ship was holed."

For the first time, McNeil seemed to have some difficulty in choosing his words. When he spoke again he avoided Grant's eyes.

"I didn't behave too well then. Something happened that I thought was impossible. I've always been quite sure that I'd never lose my nerve but—it was so sudden it knocked me over."

He attempted to hide his embarrassment by humour. "The same sort of thing happened on my very first trip. I was sure I'd never be space-sick—and as a result I was much worse than if I had not been over-confident. But I got over it, and again this time. It was one of the biggest surprises of my life, Grant, when I saw that you, of all people, were beginning to crack.

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"Oh yes—the business of the wines! I can see you're thinking about that. Well, that's one thing I don't regret. I said I'd always tried to act like a civilized man, and a civilized man should always know when to get drunk. But perhaps you wouldn't understand."

Oddly enough, that was just what Grant was beginning to do. He had caught his first real glimpse of McNeil's intricate and tortuous personality and realized how utterly he had misjudged him. No—misjudged was not the right word. In many ways his judgment had been correct. But it had only touched the surface—he had never suspected the depths that lay beneath.

In a moment of insight that had never come before—and from the nature of things could never come again—Grant understood the reasons behind McNeil's action. This was nothing so simple as a coward trying to reinstate himself in the eyes of the world, for no one need ever know what happened aboard the *Star Queen*. In any case, McNeil probably cared nothing for the world's opinion, thanks to the sleek self-sufficiency that had so often annoyed Grant. But that very self-sufficiency meant that at all costs he must preserve his own good opinion of himself. Without it, life would not be worth living—and McNeil had never accepted life save on his own terms.

The engineer was watching him intently and must have guessed that Grant was coming near the truth, for he suddenly changed his tone, as though sorry he had revealed so much of his character.

"Don't think I get a quixotic pleasure from turning the other cheek," he said. "Just consider it from the point of view of pure logic. After all, we've got to come to some agreement. Has it occurred to you that if only one of us survives without a covering message from the other he'll have a very uncomfortable time explaining just what happened?"

In his blind fury Grant had completely forgotten this. "Yes," he said. "I suppose you're right."

He felt far better now. All the hate had drained out of him and he was at peace. The truth was known and he had accepted it. That it was so different from what he had imagined did not seem to matter.

"Well, let's get it over," he said unemotionally. "There's a new pack of cards lying around somewhere."

"I think we'd better speak to Venus first—both of us," replied McNeil, with peculiar emphasis. "We want a complete agreement on record in case anyone asks awkward questions later."

Grant nodded absently. He did not mind very much now, one way or the other. He even smiled, ten minutes later, as he drew his card from the pack and laid it, face upward, beside McNeil's . . .

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" So that's the whole story, is it? " said the mate, wondering how soon he could decently get to the transmitter.

" Yes," said McNeil evenly, " that's all there was to it."

The mate bit his pencil, trying to frame the next question. " And I suppose Grant took it all quite calmly? "

The captain gave him a glare, which he avoided, and McNeil looked at him coldly as if he could see through to the sensation-mongering headlines ranged behind. He got to his feet and moved over to the observation port. " You heard his broadcast, didn't you? Wasn't that calm enough? "

The mate sighed. It still seemed hard to believe that in such circumstances two men could have behaved in so reasonable, so unemotional a manner. He could have pictured all sorts of dramatic possibilities—sudden outbursts of insanity, even attempts at murder. Yet, according to McNeil, nothing at all happened. It was too bad.

McNeil was speaking again, as if to himself. " Yes, Grant behaved very well—very well indeed. It was a great pity—"

Then he seemed to lose himself in the ever-fresh, incomparable glory of the approaching planet. Not far beneath and coming closer by kilometres every second, the snow-white crescent arms of Venus spanned more than half the sky. Down there were life and warmth and civilization—and air.

The future, which not long ago had seemed contracted to a point, had opened out again into all its unknown possibilities and wonders.

But behind him McNeil could sense the eyes of his rescuers, probing, questioning—and condemning.

All his life he would hear whispers. Voices would be saying behind his back, " Isn't that the man who . . . ? "

He didn't care. For once in his life, at least, he had done something of which he could feel unashamed. Perhaps one day his own pitiless self-analysis would strip bare the motives behind his actions, would whisper, " Altruism? Don't be a fool! You did it for yourself—so much more important than anyone else! "

But the perverse, maddening voices, which all his life had made nothing seem worth while, were silent for the moment. He felt content. He had reached the calm at the centre of the hurricane. While it lasted he would enjoy it to the full.

★ *This well-known science-fiction writer, born* 1917, *was war-time radar lecturer in the Royal Air Force. Now, Chairman of the British Interplanetary Society: a collection of his stories, " Expedition to Earth," is forthcoming.*

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AUNT CHAYA SEES RED

She began to wish she had never learnt how to throw a bomb

by WOLF MANKOWITZ

ONE sabbath my great-grandfather was singing some verses of the service that belonged to the cantor. The cantor sang louder. My great-grandfather, who had a very strong voice, sang louder still so that one or two men in the synagogue felt uncomfortable and wished that Reb Sholem Pinsk, the beadle, would arrive and quietly request my great-grandfather to let the cantor earn the few pennies he was paid.

But where was Reb Sholem? This was really a question to ask, for where should a beadle be on sabbath morning if not in synagogue? Then, suddenly, like an explosion, in ran Reb Sholem waving his spectacles in one hand and his praying-shawl in the other. He rushed up to my great-grandfather, who was singing even more loudly, and pulled his coat.

"Why shouldn't I sing?" asked my great-grandfather. "What sort of a cantor does he think he is? My own cow can sing better."

Reb Sholem went on pulling his arm. "Listen," he wheezed between coughing and spitting, for he was an old man to have been running so fast. "Listen," he grunted, "the bronze horse at Nevel has been blown up."

"What?" cried all the men. "The bronze horse at Nevel? You don't say so?" they said.

"I'm telling you," shouted Reb Sholem Pinsk, "the bronze horse standing in the market-place at Nevel has been blown up."

The cantor was taking advantage of the disturbance to get through a few verses without assistance. But what was the use since everyone was listening to Reb Sholem? The cantor stopped singing and called out in a rich voice, "Reb Sholem, why should we care whether the bronze horse at Nevel is blown up or not? We are Jews and this is shabbos and we are in synagogue. What do we care about the bronze horse at Nevel?"

"He's right," said my great-grandfather. "He can't sing, but what he says is true. What do I care about the bronze horse at Nevel. I already have enough worries of my own." And he began to sing where he had left off.

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" He's right," said all the men. " *We* should worry about the bronze horse at Nevel! " And they straightened their praying-shawls and went back to their seats. Reb Sholem pulled at my great-grandfather's coat again. " Believe me," he said, " you should be worried. We should all be worried."

" You should have no false gods, Reb Sholem, especially as, late on shabbos or not, you are the beadle," said the cantor severely.

" God forbid! " answered Reb Sholem. " Let all bronze idols be blown up. But—" and again he pulled at my great-grandfather's coat, " not by your youngest sister, Chaya."

" What? " shouted my great-grandfather.

" At least he has stopped singing," thought the cantor.

" Your youngest sister, Chaya, has blown up the bronze horse at Nevel," repeated Reb Sholem.

" God help us," whispered my great-grandfather and walked straight out of the synagogue.

" Now perhaps I can sing without an ass braying," thought the cantor.

When my great-grandfather arrived home he was greeted by the sound of crying, and voices all asking different questions at the same time. The family was gathered around Aunt Chaya, asking her questions, and weeping for her, and so worrying the poor woman that, true as she remained in principle to the Revolution, she was beginning to wish she had never learnt how to make bombs, nor how to throw them, particularly in the direction of, for example, bronze horses.

But everyone was silenced by my great-grandfather shouting, " Hold your tongues, you geese, or I shall give you something to cry about. You understand me? " Then he continued politely, " First, you must understand, my dear Chaya, that we are very pleased to see you."

Everyone shouted out " Certainly! " " I should think so! " " Naturally! "

" Be quiet! " my great-grandfather shouted. He turned again to his young sister. " Chaya," he said in a solemn voice, " Chaya, I have always said to you: make your own decisions and go your own way, for if you must associate with riff-raff, then it must surely be God's intention, and it is not for me to interfere. But now you have done some terrible thing, and although God certainly knows what you have done and why you have done it, I do not, and if it is not troubling you too much I should like to hear the entire story." And my great-grandfather sat down in his chair, in which, of course, no one else was sitting.

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Aunt Chaya was a little woman even at the best of times, but when my great-grandfather stood beside her they looked like a big gander and a little goose. She had never been a great talker but you could see from the way her eyes moved quickly, like a pair of small fish, that she thought a great deal. So she stood there, in an old torn black dress, with a red ribbon in her tightly-curled black hair that always looked freshly oiled, and told them how she blew up the bronze horse at Nevel.

The revolutionary party Aunt Chaya belonged to was not very large, but Aunt Chaya had been a member ever since she was a girl. In those days, a few of the less religious youngsters from the village used to go in couples, the boys with red handkerchiefs tied round their necks, their arms round the waists of the girls, and the girls with red ribbons in their hair, into the woods, there to listen to one another's speeches, and to sing revolutionary songs, and also, to be frank, to make love.

One Sunday afternoon, Chaya, a young girl at the time, followed them into the wood, hid in a tree near by, listened, watched, and learnt. Then she came down from the tree and said that unless they let her become a member she would tell all their fathers what the Revolution really meant. So they let her join although she was so small and so young, but soon they began to respect her.

She had a genius for hiding revolutionary pamphlets. She became secretary of the group, and once when the police came to the village to see if there were any deserters from the Czar's army about, Chaya hid a broken pistol which a party speaker from Lutzen had given her. She hid it in the earth closet and all the brothers and sisters in the party said what a genius she had for organization.

But when Chaya left the village and the others had all married, and the boys blew their noses or carried their dinners in the red handkerchiefs, and the girls used their red ribbons to tie their aprons, Chaya began to learn other things. She even went on missions and because the party remained so small, became a very important person indeed.

I am telling you all this so that you shan't be surprised that Aunt Chaya, small as she was, should be chosen to throw the bomb at Peter Petrovich Minsky. But now I expect you want to know something of Peter Petrovich as well, for there is no end to people's curiosity. So.

Peter Petrovich was a clerk in the Recruitment Office at Nevel. When the recruits were brought in, Peter Petrovich pulled his thick moustaches, stared through his steel-framed spectacles, which contained only plain glass but made him feel important,

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and asked questions. "Your name is what?—You were born where?—Your father was what?"

Naturally, a man who asks so many questions is a great nuisance. Aunt Chaya's party had just decided that the only way to be noticed was to become a great nuisance, just like Peter Petrovich, for there he was, a very small official indeed, but if it wasn't for Peter Petrovich there would be no Recruitment Office, and if there was no Office there would be nowhere for the recruits to go, and if there was nowhere for the recruits to go they would stay at home in their villages, and if they stayed at home they wouldn't be in the Czar's army, and then the Czar would have no army and there would be nothing to stop the Revolution.

If it wasn't for Peter Petrovich, there would be happiness for all and a picture of Aunt Chaya in every village in Russia, but there was Peter Petrovich, sitting every day in his Recruitment Office, pulling his moustaches, looking through his plain glasses, asking questions, and sending men into the Czar's army.

It was unbearable that such a man as he should stand in the way of the Revolution, and the party decided it wouldn't put up with it any longer.

Peter Petrovich was to be blown up one morning as he went into his Recruitment Office. The morning was better than the evening, because there would be more people about and this would make the bomb-thrower harder to find. It would also save another day's lot of men from the Czar's army. What was more natural than that Aunt Chaya, with her record and reputation, should be chosen to throw the bomb? Though my great-grandfather was against fighting except sometimes with the fists like a man, believe me, he would have been insulted if Aunt Chaya had not been chosen.

Now, the Recruitment Office of Peter Petrovich Minsky stood in the market-place of Nevel, and in the centre of this market-place there also stood a large, beautiful, very old bronze horse. Tell me, how many towns do you know where they have a bronze horse? You agree, not every town in the world can turn round and say, "We have a bronze horse standing in the market-place."

And the bronze horse at Nevel was certainly a horse to end horses. There it stood, in the snow and in the heat, covered with ice or covered with dust, always at the centre of Nevel for everyone to see and admire. It pranced up, waving its forefeet in the air, its mane blew all over the place, its tail was long and thick, its flanks were enormous, its eyes were wild, its nostrils wide open, its teeth bared, its lips covered with spume. Why, you could almost hear it neighing, you could almost hear its hind feet stamp

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the earth, and any minute it might run you over and leave Nevel behind in a cloud of dust. No wonder the citizens of Nevel were proud of that horse, for, whoever you are, it would have given you pleasure to see it. You would have taken your cap off to the town of Nevel and agreed that it was a very fine town indeed.

Peter Petrovich Minsky passed the bronze horse every day as he crossed the market-place to his Recruitment Office. Every day he walked past the horse without so much as a look at it, staring straight ahead through his glasses, counting up, no doubt, how many good men he would throw to the Czar that day. For all I know, he got a commission on each man, per head, you might say, like cattle or sheep.

Nevel could spare such a man. Nothing more need have been said if only Aunt Chaya had been a little more careful. The fact is that, in spite of her quick bright eyes, she was a little bit long-sighted. Certainly, Peter Petrovich must have been very annoyed at losing all his hair, especially his moustaches, and, of course, his glasses were completely destroyed and his overcoat torn to shreds but he himself was still alive after the bomb was thrown. But the bronze horse—Oh my goodness, the bronze horse had really left Nevel in a cloud of dust! And when the dust cleared, there was nothing to be seen except its hind feet.

Everything else was spread all over the market-place. A cabbage-seller was knocked out by one of the front legs, a stall of cakes was upset by its head, everything was in a terrible state, and the bronze horse had left Nevel for good. You can imagine how everyone felt about Aunt Chaya. Peter Petrovich they could manage without, but the bronze horse—who could forgive?

So it was with great enthusiasm that the police from Nevel began to make inquiries after Aunt Chaya. And, she said, it was only a matter of time before they traced her to the village.

"And to my house?" asked my great-grandfather.

"Exactly so," replied Aunt Chaya, her eyes darting about the room looking for policemen. Everyone started to shout and ask questions again and, naturally, my great-grandmother was crying.

"Well," said my great-grandfather, "let everyone be quiet. We are all in great danger and I must think carefully. But what, first of all, is that terrible smell?"

Everyone turned round and sniffed, and my great-grandmother cried out, "It must be the cat. She is dead you know."

At this moment, who should run in but a friend of my young grandfather's, a boy with a very long nose and side-curls who was, in spite of being pious, a terrible liar. "Listen," he shouted, "a whole lot of police are arriving on horses. Which is your Aunt Chaya who blew up the bronze horse at Nevel?"

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"Oh," cried my great-grandfather, "it is too late to do anything! Hide under the stove, Chayele, quickly, with the chickens, and perhaps they will not see you. What a terrible smell!" he went on. "Where is this dead cat?"

Now, though it was really a bad smell, my great-grandfather was sorry to see the cat gone like that, for it was a good cat and had lived with the family for a long time, catching rats sometimes as long as your arm. All the children played with it and it hardly ever bit them except when rats were short, and that wasn't often, because there were plenty of rats at all times in the village. It was not a cat to die so easily, brought up like that, to a hard life with few comforts. But what had happened was that, by dying, this cat had saved eight lives.

And I expect you had better hear about that before I finally explain how Aunt Chaya was buried.

It is a strange thing that among all the foods that the believer may not eat, you do not find mushrooms mentioned. And yet, on the other hand, it is not such a strange thing, because the rabbis must have known how good a pot of mushrooms can taste, and how they make a change from soup and potatoes. My great-grandmother's mother was very fond of a dish of mushrooms, so fond of them, in fact, that in the season, in spite of being a very old woman—you can tell how old, she was my great-grandfather's mother-in-law—she would go down to the meadows and look around for perhaps two or three hours for mushrooms.

In those days, there were really mushrooms, not like now the size of a pin-head, but big as saucers, big as plates some of them. One morning the old woman was searching in some new fields, slowly walking along, talking to herself, and looking carefully about—but she couldn't find her mushrooms anywhere.

"So," she said, "now they are taking from me my only pleasure. They take from an old woman a few mushrooms nobody wants. Nobody wants me. Nobody looks after me, so they take away my mushrooms." As she got ready to cry a little, she suddenly noticed a whole dinner of mushrooms under some trees. "My prayer has been answered," she wheezed. "There is a God who cares for the old and will never see them want."

What wonderful mushrooms they were, bigger than ever before, and golden yellow like rich butter! Home she took them, talking all the time, and feeling like an angel. She skinned and washed them, flavoured them just so, and left the pot on the stove to cook, while she sat in a corner and saw that no one took them away. But she was tired by the excitement and talking, and fell asleep in no time.

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When, suddenly, there was a noise and the old woman woke up, it was too late, for the cat had knocked the pot down and was eating the mushrooms up as quickly as she could swallow. How the old woman swore at the cat, and threw things at it, but it was too hungry to notice. Without moving, it finished the mushrooms and then, leaving the old woman crying her eyes out, lamenting the misery of being old and weak, the cat walked into my great-grandfather's workshop, and went to sleep in one of his biggest and warmest tool-chests.

So it was that this famished cat saved the old woman's life—such as there was left of it—as well as the lives of her grandchildren because, naturally, she always gave them a few spoonfuls of her mushroom stew. And now everyone in the house knew it at last, for when my great-grandmother had seen the cat lying dead in the tool-chest, all she had done was to say, " Fah, fah," and close the lid, hoping somehow it would disappear.

It did not disappear. It was smelling to the highest part of heaven, which brings us back to the story of how Aunt Chaya was buried.

It turned out that this little liar who, you remember, came rushing in, shouting, " The police are coming," was telling the truth, for a change. In next to no time, the police were in the house, and everyone stood around with their mouths open, saying " Sir," because this is the only way to make sure that a policeman doesn't take you to prison.

Only two policemen came into the house, but believe me, when you've got a hunted criminal hiding under the stove with the chickens, even two policemen are no joke. Outside could be heard the voices of a whole regiment, swearing and laughing and telling stories to one another.

One of the policemen must have been a General almost, for he was covered from head to foot in gold braid and gold stripes and gold tassels. He had an enormous moustache—much bigger than Peter Petrovich's—and he kept his helmet on, which my great-grandmother thought was very nice of him, it being the custom in a Jewish house.

The other policeman was less well dressed but much fatter. He took his helmet off and called my great-grandmother " dear lady," and she didn't like the look of him at all. My great-grandfather just said good-day to them, beckoning all the children to leave the room.

The first policeman looked round the room and wrinkled his nose. " Do you smell something unpleasant, Ruspensky? "

The other replied, " I do, Peter Ilyitch. But not unfamiliar."

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" Are you the brother of the Revolutionary, Chaya? " The first one snapped at my great-grandfather.

" It is a familiar smell, Peter Ilyitch," said the other policeman, " I believe—"

" Don't say it, Ruspensky," answered Peter Ilyitch. " I think you are right." He turned on my great-grandfather and said sternly, " There is something dead in this house, is there not? " And, truthfully, my great-grandfather replied, " There is."

" And where is your sister Chaya, the Red cow? " asked one of the two (I don't know whether Peter Ilyitch or Ruspensky).

Praying silently, my great-grandfather said, " She has been dead these two days, and in this hot weather . . . you understand. Please let me take you to the body so that you can arrest her, because if what I hear is true, then she deserves to be sent to Siberia, whether she is dead or not."

The two policemen were crossing themselves again and again. " Peter Ilyitch, we should never have come into this place. We shall be cursed for ever—I already have a pain in my belly."

" We must inspect the coffin, Ruspensky, or we cannot make a report," replied the other. " Take us to it," he ordered my great-grandfather.

When he had led them into his workshop, praying all the time, my great-grandfather said, " Here is the coffin and mortal remains of my poor misguided sister Chaya. Perhaps you would care to inspect? "

Now, you must understand that the atmosphere in the workshop was quite unbearable. And really, the last thing Peter Ilyitch wanted was to have a look at my Aunt Chaya's mortal remains. " No," he said, " unnecessary. That smell is enough." And he pushed Ruspensky out of the house.

" Arrange to bury that rubbish tomorrow, you," shouted Peter Ilyitch to my great-grandfather.

" Certainly, my lord," called my great-grandfather, " with pleasure." And he wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

Aunt Chaya remained under the stove throughout her burial. Very quickly it was whispered round the village what had happened, and, naturally, everyone was pleased to attend the burial service the next day. The dead cat in the tool-chest was carried up to the graveyard, with the whole village following behind my great-grandfather and three others carrying the box.

The cantor was there and sang the whole service beautifully without interruption from my great-grandfather. Everyone wept, and after the last shovelful of earth had fallen, they all shook hands and wished my great-grandfather and great-grandmother long life.

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Meanwhile, Peter Ilyitch and Ruspensky stood by on their horses. They both had headaches because the brandy at the inn where they stayed the night was so bad, and Ruspensky had a terrible stomach-ache as well.

A pity Aunt Chaya had to miss her burial. As for the cat, believe me, it was entitled to become a saint, if we had such things. Anyhow, it must surely have had the finest funeral any cat, Jewish or Christian, has ever had, anywhere. Even in Pinsk I bet they don't look after cats better.

★ ★ ★

BRETON ONIONS

Bronze, bound cluster
  from some apple-isled Hesperides
secret on the sky's edge
  where the wave-run serried is;
strange chain-corselet
  of rare rust-gold
by a sauntering sea-huckster
  shoulder-poled;
crisp as leaf of autumn,
  copper as the sandalled
sun-stride westering
  through galleries cloud-candled;
fruit of earth's sweet nurture
  fair as any made;
richness held in ransom
  to a time-long trade.
Leathern sails of Brittany
  storm-spun past Scilly
bore from marts Massilian
  weave as white as lily,
torques of gold for island kings,
  necklets fine as grain,
weathering the world's rim
  on the sea-fall from Spain:
now from ancient harbourings
  on roads by legend laid,
comes in swinging signal
  the olden, golden trade;
smooth-skinned provender
  in silken suit of fawn
shot with splendour smouldering
  from a forgotten dawn.

ALUN LLEWELLYN

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A DAY AT THE RACES

O for a horse with wings!

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Cymbeline*

And the course is seen, with its emerald sheen,
By the bright springtide renew'd,
Like a ribbon of green, stretched out between
The ranks of the multitude.

The flag is lowered. "They're off!" "They come!"
The squadron is sweeping on;
A sway in the crowd—a murmuring hum;
"They're here!" "They're past!" "They're gone!"

ADAM LINDSAY GORDON, 1833–70,
Hippodromania

Punters' Paradise

The longer you can bet on a race the greater its fascination. Handicappers can properly enjoy the beauty of their work; clubmen and oracles of the course have due scope for reminiscence and prophecy; bookmakers in lovely leisure can indulge a little their own calculated preferences, instead of being hurried to soulless conclusions by a half-hour's market on the course; the professional backer has the longer in which to dream of his fortune made at last by some hell of a horse—spotted somewhere as interfered with, left at the post, running green, too fat, not fancied, backward—now bound to win this hell of a race. And the general public has the chance to read the horses' names in the betting news for days and days; and what a comfort that is!

JOHN GALSWORTHY, *Had a Horse*

Newmarket

See, like a routed host, with headlong pace,
The members pour amid the mingling race!
All ask, what crowds the tumult could produce—
Is Bedlam, or the Commons all broke loose?
Such noise and nonsense, betting, damning, sinking,
Such emphasis of oaths, and claret-drinking!

THOMAS WARTON, 1728–90

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Near Miss

On one occasion one of His Majesty's [King Edward VII] horses, Perrier, had proved a great disappointment by running badly in the Derby. Lord Marcus was subsequently trying to sell him to some Frenchmen, and the horse was being walked and trotted about in front of the prospective customers.

"There, monsieur," he said to the head of the commission, "is a horse after your own heart. He is of good colour, he is sound, and he has splendid bone. And he certainly should have won the Derby."

"Why didn't he win the Derby?" came the inevitable query.

"Well," replied Lord Marcus, whose tongue never failed him at a crisis, "he was running well, second, when at a most critical point of the race, six or seven others passed him, and he lost."

"Quel malheur!" murmured the Frenchman, carried away, and he bought the horse.

R. C. LYLE, *Royal Newmarket*

À Jean Bull!

Cockadoodledo, Jean!
Ha! mon Bull chéri.
Ciel! je ne moque pas, moi,
Des Anglais sans esprit.
Vanquished on your proper ground,
N'est-ce pas, mon chou?
Cockadoodledo, Jean,
Cockadoodledo!

Lines commemorating the victory in 1865 *of Gladiateur, the first French horse to win the Derby*

Horse Sense

Prince Bismarck asked me whether racing was still much encouraged in England. I replied never more so . . . "Then," cried the Prince eagerly, "there never will be Socialism in England . . . Here a gentleman cannot ride down the street without twenty persons saying to themselves, or each other, 'Why has that fellow a horse, and I have not one?' In England the more horses a nobleman has, the more popular he is. So long as the English are devoted to racing, Socialism has no chance with you."

BENJAMIN DISRAELI, *in a letter to Queen Victoria written during the Congress of Berlin*, 1870

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Voltigeur's—

The ring stands pale; forth speeds the tale, which sundry doubts inspire,
From east to west, from north to south, it travels o'er the wire;
From Richmond unto Middleham this message quickly passed—
"Your conqueror of conquerors has bowed his head at last."

Lines written on the defeat of The Flying Dutchman by Voltigeur at Doncaster in 1850

—Victory

The Richmond men became quite alive, as evening drew on, to the greatness of their victory. Such a strange night of jollity was never witnessed in Doncaster before, and the inns were overflowing to the very kitchens. Strolling into one of the latter about midnight, we espied a large group of grave clothiers; one or two of them smoking pipes, to which the monster cigar at the Great Exhibition seemed a trifle in length; while others, with eyes solemnly fixed ceiling-wards, insisted on waltzing with the cook and the other domestics. We are bound to state that the former seemed by no means to dislike this pleasing recognition of the close of her labours.

"You're going to bed, aren't you?" we said to an enthusiastic Richmond man; but—"Gor to bed indeed! You aren't half a man! Wha'd gor to bed when Voltigeur's won t' Leger and t' Coop?" was the scornful reply.

THE DRUID, *Post and Paddock*

Betting Slips

But these poor citizens, though short of bread,
Rush gaily in where trainers fear to tread.
For them the horse is as a railway train
And what he once has done will do again.
Are there not wizards of the racing caste
Who can foretell his future from his past?
Are there not gentlemen in jockey-caps
Who send us Doubles and delicious Naps?
Or, less expensive, we may take a pin
And with this aid determine what will win.
And so, wherever Englishmen are poor,
A bookie (with the wolf) is at the door.

A. P. HERBERT, *Derby Day*

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PAY AS YOU LEARN

However well you speak the language it won't do you any good

by FREDERICK BRUEGEL

"NERVOUS exhaustion," my doctor said. "It's a straightforward case, not dangerous. You must have a complete rest, and solitude. No excitement. Go for walks, but don't overdo it. You can read, but not books on philology. Simple diet. You'll have to do without the refinements of town life for a while."

"That's a very mild and reassuring diagnosis," I said. "The treatment isn't unpleasant. But where shall I go for the solitude you prescribe?"

He smiled thoughtfully "I've decided it all for you. You must go abroad—to Isola Bena. It's the off-season now; you'll probably be the only foreigner there."

Of course, Isola Bena isn't its real name. There are a lot of islands in the Mediterranean—Spanish, French, Greek, Italian, Turkish, British, and what have you. I don't wish to say who claims sovereignty over Bena; I wouldn't besmirch anyone's national honour.

"I've spent several holidays there," said my doctor complacently, "so I can give you some advice. The nearest town on the mainland is Plona. There's a daily steamer to the island from there. At Plona there is also a travel agency which has a monopoly of the Bena traffic. The islanders are backward, suspicious, and individualistic. Visitors not introduced by the agency, that is, by Mr. Sini, just don't exist for them—wouldn't, even if they paid in gold. I'll give you a letter to Sini. You won't have to deal with anyone but him. He often goes over to Bena to see how his clients are getting along."

"That's a very convenient arrangement," I said.

"Do you speak the local language?" asked my doctor.

"A little," I answered huffily, because I'm the author of the work that is the recognized authority on the language and literature of that Mediterranean country; also, not long before, my doctor had dropped such heavy hints about the book that I overcame my diplomatic deafness and sent him a free copy.

"However well you spoke the language, it wouldn't do you any

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good on the island," he said compassionately. "The dialect of Isola Bena is such that only the locals understand it. Sini will be your interpreter."

He leaned towards me confidentially. "Now, my dear chap, there are two things you'll have to look out for. Sini will try to run up your bills for you. Understandable, from his point of view. For instance, you'll find items marked *Entertainment* that you can't account for. If you let him get away with that once, you're done for."

Then he put on a new, unmedical voice. "Be careful of the women. They're pretty, and they'll flirt with you. They'll try and get off with you. If they do, you'll come to a sticky end, with some brother's or father's knife in your heart."

He reverted to his medical voice again. "If you carry out my prescribed treatment, I've no doubt your stay on Bena will cure you."

Before he went he raised his forefinger at me. "Their sense of honour out there is even touchier than the Spaniards'. The custom of blood-feud is still observed, as it was five centuries ago."

Sini received me with overwhelming heartiness, and soon arranged my accommodation. I made such a poor showing at the local language that Sini soon gave it up in favour of French, which he spoke with pride but so badly that I couldn't help correcting some of his worst mistakes. This he took as an insult, so I let him murder the language to his heart's content, which seemed to pacify him.

He went across to the island with me, and we landed at the capital, Benapolis, where he had booked rooms for me. Over drinks in my hotel on the principal square he introduced me to the parish priest, the notary, and the schoolmaster, three patricians who were at no pains to conceal their pride in the beauties and the history of their island home. In fact, they never talked about anything else.

I went down to the ship with Sini and then for my first walk. After dinner I read a little, but soon felt tired and went to bed. But I could not get to sleep. Every mandolin and male voice on the island seemed to be in full blast in front of the hotel. Must be local custom, I thought. I'll have to get used to it, like traffic noises at home.

So began my idyll. I walked and bathed and basked in the sun and ate. I took a secret pleasure in listening to people talking. Little by little their dialect revealed itself to me. Like other island patois, it had accumulated scraps of every Mediter-

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ranean language, but there were no insoluble riddles in it, for a philologist like me. Daily I became more conversant with it and listened with admiration to the cursing of the longshoremen. Their expletives embraced the ancestry, progeny, and amorous potential of the object, aspects which they built up into grotesque images of fantasy; really, it was a pleasure to hear them.

Apart from the patrician class, I found no very highly developed sense of national pride. The girls were delightful. While I was at dinner they would be promenading in the market-place. There was a free-for-all flirtation, but the local boys did not strike me as any more dashing than boys anywhere.

The prettiest girl was the schoolmaster's daughter. She was eighteen, and neither shy nor backward. I visited her father in his house, and returned his hospitality by asking him and his daughter to dine at my hotel. The schoolmaster told me he was Sini's partner and as such at my disposal at all times.

A few days later, just as I was sitting down to dinner, there was a savage scene in front of the hotel. Two young fishermen, great big fellows, set about each other with knives. A ring of onlookers stood by, but no one interfered.

The schoolmaster bobbed up from nowhere beside me, and whispered: "Blood-feud. It goes back hundreds of years. They're fighting to maintain their families' honour."

I thought it most unbecoming to have bloodshed as an accompaniment to my meals, and said so to the schoolmaster.

"Oh, it's nothing serious," he said, "just flesh-wounds." Then he lifted up his voice and shouted in the local dialect: "That'll do, lads. Pack up. Come and get your money at nine o'clock." The two men had another round of cursing, and then departed.

A few days later Sini came to see me, with the schoolmaster, bringing his first bill. Sure enough, there was the item *Entertainment*. If it had been marked "Gratuity" or "Service charge," I should have paid it without question, regardless of the doctor's advice, for I was enjoying myself and wanted peace and quiet. Still, it was a considerable sum and I had had nothing for it. What annoyed me was that they took me for a fool.

I thumped the table with my fist in a way that startled the patricians. "What's this for?"

Sini explained quietly, without emotion: "Nightly serenading with mandolins: one exhibition blood-feud, with knife-fightings."

I came out with one of the fruitiest of the island curses, as fluently as if I had spoken the Beninsular dialect all my life. I would immediately have liked to take it back again, and pay up, for I had insulted Sini in front of these notables, and it was now up to him to do something drastic about his honour.

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To my surprise, they all laughed, notables included. They even shouted, " Bravo," and clapped their hands. Sini solemnly deleted the disputed item and ordered a round of drinks on him.

I found nothing questionable in the next bill.

My victory made me bold. I no longer troubled to hide my knowledge of the language, and became everybody's friend. Deliberately and without thought of the consequences, I succumbed to the charms of Lucia, the schoolmaster's daughter. It was very pleasant, and my heart remained dagger-free. We loved each other until I came to leave for the mainland, where I was to meet Sini and pay the last of my bills. On this the item *Entertainment* figured once more. It came to a lot—enough to make up for all the times when it had not occurred.

" No! " I said, speaking fluent Beninsular. " I never ordered any *Entertainment* from you and you never provided any. So I won't pay for any."

" Oh no? " said Sini. " One has only to listen to you talking to tell how you have been entertained. When you first came, you used our noble mother tongue like an idiot. Do you think you can get the language lessons you had with Lucia for nothing? " He paused, and added, a little louder, " Or do you mean to say that what passed between you and her was something more than conversation? "

I made no answer, but paid, and we parted on friendly terms. I shan't go back to Isola Bena. But there are certain grammatical peculiarities of the dialect that I still think might be worth closer and more detailed study.

★ ★ ★

GOOD TASTE

The phrase " I may not know much about art, but I know what I like" is one which has suggested itself to all of us in moments of exasperation. I heard the other day of a variant which may become equally popular, if ever the National Gallery decides to follow the example of the American museum which now issues postage-stamp reproductions of its best pictures. To seal one's envelopes with these is a mark of practical concern for the fine arts: and, like all such gestures, it is often copied for reasons of social prestige.

" Why d'you bother with those? " an acquaintance of mine was asked. " You know you can't tell Rembrandt from Rubens."

The incipient patron flushed. " I may not know much about art," he said, " but I know what I lick."

ATTICUS, *in The Sunday Times*

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★ *From Jan de Hartog's vivid documentary of Dutch ocean tugboats, "Captain Jan," comes this story of a young mate's first voyage and how he captains a windjammer, with a crew of three, through a nightmare storm.*

BAPTISM OF STORM

by JAN DE HARTOG

BAS warned him before he went. But who would have time to listen to the gloomy warnings of an old man when he was trying to pack for a trip of eight months in a quarter of an hour?

Bas stood in the doorway, cap in hand, his bald head gleaming in the sunset, and looked at the two children startled from their honeymoon. He looked at them with soft, swimming eyes, and when he was given another drink, he said: "Go easy with that Russian fellow, Jan. A good sailor, but a madman in a gale. Don't let yourself be bullied into reckless stunts. Think of this nice girl, waiting for you; think of home."

Jan, his arms full of oilskins, noticed at that moment that he had been packing the tea-cosy. "Don't you worry about me, Skipper," he answered. "I'll manage the brute all right."

When he came back from the kitchen, still laden with oilskins, and tried to remember what it was he had gone to look for, he found Bas and Nellie whispering in the doorway. When he turned to vanish in the sunset Bas said: "God be with you, my boy." But he had set Nellie worrying with his alcoholic gabble.

"Jan, love," she said apprehensively, "do promise me you'll be careful with that Russian. Bas says . . ."

"Bas can go and boil his head," he said. "Don't you let yourself be upset by his gabble!" But she went on: Bas said this, Bas said that, and everybody knew that Sjimmenof was not to be trusted, and Joris's Aaltje's husband had . . .

"His name is Siemonov!" Jan called; "and if anyone knows that man, it's me!"

Now that was downright rubbish. He had never set eyes on the Russian. He knew plenty of stories about him, as did everybody else on the waterfront; he could even draw a portrait of him, with luck; but that was because he had a beard, which made it easy.

"And what about Donker?" Nellie asked. And for the first time since their wedding her eyes suddenly reminded him of her Mamma's. "Every child knows how Donker got his leg broken!"

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He threw the oilskins on the floor and yelled at her in his gale-voice: " And now let me tell you, you nagging drill—Ouch! " She had given him a well-aimed jab in the stomach, and there he sat, the bully, worsted with his own weapons.

" Don't think I care," Nellie lied. " But if they come carrying you into this house on a stretcher, don't say I didn't warn you in good time."

He moaned and cursed, pretending she had hurt him badly; but she wasn't taken in. She made a derisive noise with her lips and climbed the ladder to the attic to get his boots, her strong calves looking very attractive from below, in the red sunlight.

They kissed fervently when she came down. He could almost feel her shoulder-blades crack as she bit his lip with delicious ferocity and he swung her onto the bed. But the springs bounced her off and there they stood embracing again, by the window, in full view of everyone. In the middle of that embrace she suddenly looked up, her eyes worried and miserable, and whispered, " Oh, Jan, love—do promise me you won't blow yourself up for that Russian . . ."

" Blow myself up? What do you mean? "

" I have known you longer than yesterday, Jan. You're such a damn swank, when anything turns your head. Please do keep a grip on yourself. Promise me, promise . . ."

" But look here, sweetheart . . . I . . ."

" No! Don't kiss me, you Judas. Promise me. Promise you won't try and wear the Captain's stripes on your sleeve on your first trip. Keep a grip on yourself—for me, for us. Yes? "

" Yes," he said, " I promise."

The moment he saw the *Jan van Gent* he felt his heart sink. He knew that Siemonov had the reputation of a dirty neck—but good heavens! That a Dutch tug, and one owned by his own Company at that, should look like this—it was downright unbelievable.

The *Jan* was less than three years old, but she looked twenty. A tattered, worn-out ship, the wooden fenders splintered, the hull buckled and rusty, the funnel peeling and furred with soot, the whole outfit covered with a thick layer of coal-dust and grime. And the crew!

Standing on the quay, his sea-chest on his shoulder, he stared at the hell-brood waiting to receive him with toothless grins. Unshaven, criminal heads, with the strangest headgear; knitted ice-bonnets, balaclavas, naval caps with the ribbon torn off: he even spotted a bowler hat amongst them. The bowler belonged to the cook, for someone called, " Coo-kie! " and he shuffled off.

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To be fed by this dirty half-wit was going to be more dangerous than the seabats.

Suddenly a giant emerged from the Captain's cabin, a bull, waddling on his hind legs, with a face covered with hair and a sou'wester on back to front, much too small—a piece of tarpaulin on a hayrick. He knew it was Siemonov, even before the bull had sighted him with watery eyes, and called out: "Who are you? Mate? Come on board, then; damn you!"

He went on board, and noticed that the ship stank into the bargain. But he noticed something else: it vibrated with life. The safety-valve throbbed; down below, the stokers and furnace men rattled and scraped their shovels in the hold, with sometimes a bellowing snatch of song; forward and aft, and from all quarters, hobnailed boots were hurrying across the iron deck: it sounded like a beehive, and the king of the hive was towering in front of him: Uncle Bull come to life.

The Captain grasped his hand; he winced and heard some inarticulate noises like, "So! so!" and "Borother" before the giant swung round. Then suddenly the beard parted and from the red gap there flowed such a staggering collection of outlandish oaths that Jan stood and listened in awe. The stream of curses seemed to be aimed at the bunch of beachcombers fumbling with the ropes on the poop: they fumbled deftly and with an indifference that became almost heroic under the torrent of the giant's abuse.

The skipper waddled to the poop, kicked the idiot with the bowler hat out of the way, and aimed his oath stream down the hatch to the mess-room—then he fell silent as unexpectedly as he had begun. He cleared his throat and spat on the deck. When he bent down to inspect the result Jan felt he had seen enough for the present, and went to the chart-room, to stow away his chest and his oilskins for the time being.

The chart-room was in confusion: all kinds of instruments and junk were scattered about it. The centre-piece was a white chamber-pot reposing on the chart of the North Sea and surrounded by a nest of wood-shavings. The connecting-door to the Captain's cabin stood ajar and revealed a glimpse of the sty beyond.

It looked as if a sexual crime had been committed in that bunk. The blankets were hanging out of it, as though the body had been dragged away; and the sheet showed a large rent. The walls were smothered under a load of clothes; the couch was buried under a pile of rubbish, and a single hip-boot jutted from underneath it, like a broken leg. The wash-stand hung open; in the bowl a pair of socks lay soaking in inky water. The wall

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around it was a map drawn by a madman, a wild confusion of finger-marks, dried soap-suds and long trailing stains like rivers.

In the far corner of the bunk a red lamp was pouring soot on to a coloured picture postcard, possibly of some saint or other.

Seeing himself in the dirty mirror over the wash-stand with the word XROHOMETPB written across his face with soap, he couldn't help smiling a wan smile, and he muttered to himself: "Well, Jan, my boy—here we are!"

Towards evening they sailed: a small, black ship with whiskers of foam, hurrying down a river that gleamed like copper in the sunset.

There was only a tiny stretch of Holland to say good-bye to between the harbour and the outer buoy, with meadows each side, houses and trees and dead-straight ditches running away to the misty horizon. A mill flashed sun-sparks from its whirling sails; sea-gulls screeched and dived in the liquid fire of the river. To some it might seem dreary—and yet to him it looked moving and homely at the start of this long trip.

Why sail about on that endless sea behind these dunes? Just a meadow between the ditches, a little house with a tuft of willows and a couple of cows in the field—these are enough to fill a lifetime: why has a man to be so greedy?

Some of the crew stood looking aft on the poop; Jan Wandelaar stared from the bridge. He had seen this very same view at least a hundred times without any particular emotion; but then it had always been with the knowledge that he would be seeing it again in the next few days. Now eight months without it lay ahead and made everything appear significant and large; in the light of the setting sun even the smallest things grew giant shadows.

At the light-buoy the pilot was taken off, the last man from the shore. He hurried away, the pilot, like a missionary who has suddenly weakened; Jan stayed behind, alone amongst the cannibals. Listen to those stokers caterwauling in the hold. As if they were roasting someone, and rejoicing in anticipation.

The *Jan van Gent* said farewell to the pilot with a blast from her hooter, a hoarse gurgle, and then a long moaning wail, thin and without echo in the boundless space between heaven and sea. She sailed, rolling with the swell, towards a red feather cloud, high and fiery over the western horizon, like a cock's comb. The shore sank away in the darkness that was overtaking them; now they wouldn't see any more of Holland for months on end, except in the symbol of the flag that fluttered on the mizzen-mast.

He stood looking back for a while, full of sadness and self-

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pity and love for Nellie. Then he went down below to the mess-room and started a letter to her.

Sweetheart, everything is going nicely. I have a barn of a cabin adjoining the mess-room, which is a kind of saloon with leatherette seats, and there are lots more innovations on board this ship: a winch for the hawsers (that's going to make a difference all right!), a steering engine, a telegraph to the engine-room from the bridge (instead of the tube and whistle, always getting full of sea-water), and a Captain who . . .

He wrote a lot about the Captain, but crossed it out, adding:

He'll be all right in the end. The ship is not very clean and the crew is a bit out of the ordinary, but they look like fine fellows who'll be all right in the end. At all events, I must confess I'm looking forward a lot to this trip. Your photograph I pinned on the wall at the foot of my bunk, so I can look at you when I get up or turn in. Now you have gone . . .

He thought a lot, but it was not the kind of thing one puts in a letter, and he crossed it out.

When I unpacked my chest I found out that I'd forgotten my razor, but you must have noticed that as well. Don't send it to Hull, where we are to pick up the dredger for Akassa, because it would arrive too late and I need a new one anyhow. I am . . .

No, not in a letter. He crossed it out.

Don't forget to open the top of the stove, before you go to bed, after you have half shut the damper in the flue, for otherwise there is a risk of coal fumes and they are dangerous, especially as you aren't used to this stove yet. Say good-bye for me to Mama and Pa and tell them I was in such a hurry that I couldn't come and say good-bye myself, and if you should feel like writing to me my next address is Lisbon, in case you should have something of importance to tell; it is our first coaling station. I . . .

No, no; not in a letter. He sat and chewed the penholder, thinking how to hint at it without Bas or Mama Dijkmans realizing what he was talking about. *I miss you a lot? I wish you were here? I had better not think of you too much, or I'll go demented?*

Not on your life; it would be as if they peeped through the letter-box and caught them in an embrace. *I consider myself to be a very lucky man, being married to you, and . . .?*

"Mate!" yelled a voice like the last trump, from the bridge. "Number one! Where the hell . . ."

He wrote: *Love—Jan*, and hurried out.

That Siemonov was a queer case. He loomed up now in the middle of the night on the bridge, in his underwear with his oil-

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skins thrown over his shoulders, the sleeves dangling empty. He didn't ask any questions, didn't say a word, didn't even respond to "Hullo, Captain . . ." He just stood motionless on the stairs that led up to the bridge, staring at the youngster pacing up and down. What the devil else was one to do under the eyes of that ogre, in the middle of the night?

And then, like a mirage, he was gone. Vanished into the darkness, and no more sign or sound of him until he came to take over.

Jan asked the man at the wheel if the Captain made a habit of that kind of thing: popping up and frightening the hide off everybody with his lunatic stare. The man at the wheel said: "Ay," without taking his eyes off the compass, like a clergyman reading the Bible.

Thank goodness, the First Engineer (another of those "fine fellows, who'd be all right in the end") felt like a pipe and hammered on the partition between their cabins with a slipper after the dog-watch, calling: "Hey, sleep-walker! Got a smoke on you?"

Jan went along to the man's cabin to give him a pipeful, and there lay the Chief: long, thin, and bald, stretched out on his bunk in a cabin like a miniature boudoir.

There were pictures and souvenirs everywhere, and knick-knacks crowded the walls; there were also rows of portraits mass-framed or mounted separately. Over the wash-stand there were photographs of a fat child in bell-bottom trousers, with a face like the monkeys who hear, see, and speak no evil, and the legend in gilt lettering: *Our Little Sun.*

He had even got flowers in his cabin, artificial geraniums in a pot, which was suspended on chains from the ceiling, and which swung about like a censer as the ship rolled.

A murky, pink light gave the cabin a rather sinister appearance. The lamp was covered by an orange shade with a hole in it, through which a ray of light caught the bald head of the Chief. The hole was intended, the scarecrow explained, to provide some light to read by in his bunk at night, if he could not sleep and felt like some quiet diversion.

The books were lined up on a small shelf at the foot of the bunk: *The Correct Letter-Writer; Your Dreams Explained; Manual of Marine Engineering; Woman's Flesh by Auction.*

They smoked a pipe in the pink dusk of this unfading sunset. The Chief asked him all about himself, and in his turn told him all about his wife, called Alie, and his five kids, Piet, Freek, Hennie, Doortje, and Zus. There they were—they looked a bit on the fat side, but the camera had moved.

The Chief didn't say much about the Captain; it was obvious

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that those two didn't take to each other. Siemonov was skipper of an ice-breaker, he said, that came to Amsterdam for an overhaul; when he was there he spotted the *Jan* on the stocks and fell in love with her to such an extent that he signed himself up in a permanent contract with the owners. A master-sailor, undoubtedly, but . . . oh well, young fellow, you wait and see.

They gassed on a bit. Then, suddenly, the Chief fell asleep, without Jan noticing the change for quite a while.

He went back to his cabin and fell on his bunk without taking off his clothes; in another hour he was due for the next watch, so it wouldn't be worth the trouble. Jan glanced at the photograph of Nellie smiling serenely at the foot of his bunk. It was certainly a lovely photo.

When the *Jan van Gent* came churning into Hull harbour, full steam ahead, all the hands off duty were peering over the rail, in order not to miss the first sight of the tow.

The tow was an important item. For three months on end that bulky carcass would be lumbering in their wake, an object requiring unceasing vigilance and care—the nurses were curious about their new charge. " Another of those poxy cutters, if you ask me," said little Abel the stoker, who collected copies of *Mon Plaisir* and knew the word for love in every language under the sun.

The cook squeaked that it was a lighter pregnant with a tiny tug; but Stobbe, the bo'sun, almost as huge as the Captain, and with about as much feeling, roared: " A dredger—and get the hell back to your work, you lazy bastards."

Siemonov waddled ashore as soon as the gang-plank had hit the quay. He ran off as if he were chasing some elusive prey but all he wanted was to get hold of the owners of that dredger and its papers.

" Not a dog ashore! " he shouted at Jan. " Anyone who tries to go to de wimmen, you break de legs for him."

Jan had known him for two days now, and said: " Ay, ay, Captain."

Cook had overheard it (cook overheard everything), and after a meeting of the committee in the foc'sle he came hurrying along the deck in his carpet slippers, squealing: " Mate, Mate, mister Mate! The boys can hear a leak down below! Hurry, hurry! "

But Jan had danced with the mermaid long enough by now to know her song. He said: " If you don't get out of my sight, you smelly soup-pedlar, I'll let you hear a leak that'll drown you! " Cook grasped his bowler hat, a flabbergasted man, and shuffled back to the foc'sle with the verdict: no go, boys: he's too wise.

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Orders had been received from the owners of that stinking dredger, saying she was not to sail because they didn't consider it safe in the present state of the weather. The glass had fallen steadily during the night and looked a bit alarming now. A stiff south-westerly wind was blowing, bringing with it sheets of driving rain.

Because everything seemed to point to dirty weather ahead, the underwriters insisted that sailing should be postponed until the sky had cleared. This meant that the crew would have to lie berthed up, biting their nails in boredom, for days to come. And to make things worse, there was a fair in town.

A blessed fair, if you please! The Captain's curses were like the first rumblings of a volcano on the verge of an eruption. The threatening sparks of that eruption began to fall thickly on the heads of the crew who, quite oblivious to the warning, yearned for the forbidden land of the fair-ground.

A fair, a fair! Raucous music blared in the streets; crowds of singing people jostled past—and here they were, like outcasts, with idle hands, eyes glued to the sky, and legs that itched to join the dance. Siemonov prowled about on the deck, in and out of his cabin, like a watchdog; the bo'sun was the only one who was enjoying himself.

The Chief, busy rolling his cigarettes for the next day, remarked, sombrely shaking his head: "Tomorrow he may be able to keep the lid on, with luck—but the day after they'll blow it off; and then heaven only knows when they'll get back, and in what condition. Yes, young fellow,"—and his large pink tongue glistened in the lamplight as he licked a cigarette, "that comes of all this slave-driving. If these people could have a bit of leisure now and again, they would behave themselves."

The next morning the despairing Siemonov lay anchored to a bottle in his bunk, with hell in his eyes and more vodka behind his beard than his breath could soak up.

"Anything!" he groaned. "I can stand anything, but not this damned waiting, waiting, waiting."

But fate sent a consoling angel in the person of a thin, morose Captain with rubbery legs, who came to inquire whether the Dutchman would be willing to tow his ship to South Shields, for scrap. Siemonov embraced this lamp-post of a man, called him borother, gave him a drink, and thrust a cigar in his beard (for the man wore one too, like a bunch of cobwebs on his chest).

After this they left together to have a look at the ship. The wind whined sadly under the doors when the mess-room hatch was shoved open and Bout, the Second Engineer, came stumbling down the stairs. "You watch," said Bout, "now we're

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going to do some sailing, chum; now you'll be able to see Siem dancing."

He came back on board at a gallop and started cursing even before he'd got the gang-plank down. He bawled the crew out of the foc'sle, kicked the Third Engineer out of his bunk—a pale, hollow-eyed kid, who had been seasick ever since they left; Jan had hardly seen him yet. He had the bo'sun hint at a tot of rum for everyone if they made high tide.

A quarter of an hour later the mooring-ropes crashed onto the deck, in the nick of time, for the telegraph to the engine-room had already rung out: Full Ahead. The thunder of the wash under the stern drowned the squeaking of a seedy youth, who had come running out of the office of the dredger-owners.

"When will you be back?" he shouted, and Siemonov bellowed "Tomorrow!"

The youth went on about something with a harassed face, pointing at the office; but the wash churning up against the quay drenched him with a burst of spray and he backed away.

"Tomorrow—or never!" Siemonov roared as the *Jan van Gent* swung into the harbour. The youth stood staring after them, apparently fearing it would be the latter.

In the trees the rain foamed and spluttered, lashed by the wind.

Up river lay a tall three-master, high on the water, with a small emergency crew on board—rather an odd collection. The *Jan van Gent* drew alongside, striking her hull with a thud. In contrast to the sailing-ship, the tug seemed a mere mongrel of a craft, a dog at the feet of a lady.

For less than half an hour the tug lay smoking to leeward of the *Scottish Maiden*. During that time the safety valve screamed beside the soot-belching funnel, the winches rattled, the deck echoed with the banging of hawsers and the clatter of hobnailed boots. Jan boarded the windjammer by a rope-ladder thrown out by her crew; he took two seamen up with him to fasten the hawser.

Siemonov's voice was everywhere; bellowing in the distance, roaring through the megaphone to the men above; his oaths cut like the lashes of a whip on bare skin. The deck-hands hurried, speechless and panting, dragging hawsers, cables, rope-carriers.

The gang of the *Scottish Maiden* looked on idiotically. Good Lord, what a bunch! Jan chased them forward and made them lend a hand at hauling in the hawser: "Get a move on, lads! Jump to it, damn you!" When he went to fasten the end of the wire to the last link of the anchor-chain, Siemonov's voice cut him short with the order to take the wire through the hawse-pipe

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and to secure it to the bollards on deck. It was a legitimate command for it saved a lot of time, but it was foolhardy. If that wire started chafing against the bow in heavy seas, it might easily snap and then—good-bye to your tow.

The Captain repeated the order, charged with such a load of abuse that even the panting slaves below deck looked up. It drained Jan's blood from his cheeks, but he thought: all right, you big brute, all right—but you'll be sorry for this.

The hawser had hardly been secured when the *Jan van Gent* began to pull. The mooring-ropes of the windjammer splashed into the water; the thin Captain on the companion shouted: "Hey, hey! Easy!" Siemonov paid no heed to his feeble croaking. The *Jan van Gent* hung panting with a heavy list, like a whipped horse in the traces.

On the river the tow had to be steered so that, in a continually varying course, the swing of the vessel was allowed for. It was a tricky business in this narrow channel with such a high-rigged craft. The wind had freshened from moderate to strong, with sudden squalls. To tow a tall vessel like her right round between the muddy banks with all her rigging up was no trifle. But Siemonov himself had taken the wheel and he proved himself a master. The manœuvre was carried out without a hitch.

Now they went down the river with nothing to worry about; they had made the high tide and the Captain was all smiles. He ordered the bo'sun to give the crew the rum he'd promised, and whacked Jan's shoulder with a blow that jarred his knees. "Well done, borother, good work. Here, have a drink!"

The pilot got a drink too; it was all very matey on that bridge. "Pingg! Your health!"—Yes, the tugboat service was the thing to be in.

Off the Humber Lightship the pilot was dropped, and they set course for Flamborough Head. Because the wind was favourable Siemonov signalled to the *Scottish Maiden* that she had better set some sail. It was a long time before there were any visible results, as if the pastry-cooks over there had to decide between themselves what "sail" was, before hoisting a sheet or two of lower canvas—very clumsily.

"More sail!" Siemonov signalled, and had the code included oaths he would have run up the lot.

He cursed his Mate, but Jan could take it now. He was beginning to take a liking to this monster, forgetting his recklessness and his senseless roaring. The way the Bull skated about on that river was wonderful—something to tell one's children about.

There are sailors and sailors. Some know their job and that's

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all there is to it, but others make an art of it. The way Siemonov negotiated those river bends was a joy; it gave a feeling of beauty to anyone with a sense for such a thing.

On the *Scottish Maiden* the diminutive men toddled crazily about on the rolling deck, as if they were playing hide-and-seek. The thin Captain was standing at the wheel on the poop, his beard a pennant in the wind. He waved his arms and shook his fists and must have been screaming like a madman, for the other specks hesitated a second and toddled away in the opposite direction.

Then the Captain—after a pathetic pantomime of arms and legs, comical to look at from a distance—let go of the wheel to go forward where the crew were playing with a staysail. The ship went off her course, the sails flapped, and the whole crowd was swept off its feet.

Jan roared with laughter, and everybody on deck guffawed, except the Third Engineer, poor boy, who had just come up from below to vomit and who now hurried back, ill and miserable, thinking he had been the cause of all this hilarity.

Siemonov asked suddenly: "Hey, you. Can you sail a windjammer?" Jan said, innocently: "Of course!" only to realize what he had said when the hand of the Captain crashed down on his shoulder, with: "Good, borother! Get yourself on board of that barge—and get a move on!"

Well, there we were. This was it.

Promise me, Jan, think of me, of us . . . Too late. The crew of the starboard boat had started swinging her out already, to the bloodcurdling roaring of the Captain.

"Hurry up, Wandelaar is taking over the tow—Bo'sun! Come on up to take the Mate's place! Brega! Kaap! Collect your things, you two—you're to sail that jammer! Don't stand and gape, you fatheads, hurry up!"

An order was an order. If Jan was a little nervous as he hastily crammed some things into his spare oilskin, it had nothing to do with fear, or a bad conscience. Oh dear, no. It was the fever of adventure. Yet, it was odd that at that moment he should have forgotten to look at the little portrait of Nellie which was staring him in the face while he was rummaging in a drawer for a pair of pants.

He jumped into the boat, and the deck-hands took the oars. There was an immense swell running; it was quite a job to avoid being capsized by the hawser; for the Captain with the cobweb-beard over there was steering the crookedest course in Christendom, and every time he tacked, the treacherous hawser jumped out of the water with a terrifying twang.

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But all went well. They got safely alongside and climbed up the swaying rope-ladder to the deck of the *Scottish Maiden*. What looked funny from afar was tragic at close quarters; a man had broken his leg when a flapping sail flung him against the rail. The Captain stood at the wheel, with rolling eyes in a face overgrown with beard, as if he were sailing the *Flying Dutchman* round the Cape.

Jan didn't know much English, but it was enough. First he had his boat hauled up by his men, Bulle Brega and Kees de Kaap, two heavyweights with the faces of bruisers and the hearts of young girls.

The thin Captain went wild when told that he had to hand over the command of his ship; he protested in a screaming voice that broke with a sob when he was pushed away from the wheel. Jan put the vessel back upon her course; she pulled hard because of the flapping staysail; they had better do something about that or there'd be accidents.

He called Bulle Brega, handed over the wheel to him, and, when the Captain looked as if he were up to some monkey-business, he said, with a blush: " You keep low, sir, or I will put you flat."

As soon as the deck was shipshape, he went down to look for the Captain, and found him in his cabin: head in hands, a bottle of solace in front of him on the table. He whimpered about " the wife " and " my kids at home," plucking in his wet beard for a lost cigar-stub.

It was bad to see a drunkard like him in command of so elegant a ship; but the sailing trade was dying out and this was his last trip. There was nothing for it, then, but to let him mumble on in that vast cabin, with its fraying plush and the gilt peeling off the mouldy panelling, alone with his bottle and the reflection of his despair in the polished mahogany table—God help him.

The wind had freshened even more. The *Scottish Maiden* must have been a sprinter in her palmier days, for she skimmed the sea, sails bellying, and ran after the tug at a speed of nine knots. He saw that the *Jan van Gent* had a job to keep ahead of her, and ordered the three shivering skeletons of the lee-watch to keep an eye open for signals ahead.

In the chart-room he checked the barometer by the flickering light of a match. It didn't look too cheerful—the glass had fallen so much that he gave a long low whistle. But on his round of the deck everything seemed to be lashed shipshape; there was nothing left to do but to sail and keep one's fingers crossed.

Bulle Brega was at the wheel, looking, in the dusk, like a tree rooted to the deck, with his great fat legs. He was a fellow you

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could trust with anything—there was such simple goodness in his face.

Kees de Kaap, though smaller, was almost as broad-shouldered as Brega, so he wasn't exactly a baby in arms either. With these two stalwarts he'd be able to go a long way, if the weather wasn't impossible.

And then, all of a sudden, a stranger emerged from the galley like a mole out of its tunnel: a grey-haired gnome, the mere sight of him enough to make one seasick. He wore a little cap, grown to his skull like the cup on an acorn, and a kind of apron covered with grease-smears and blood-stains. He was carrying a steaming pan, and he announced: "Me cookie, here dinner ready." He then put the pan on the deck, waddled back to his hole and disappeared into it again.

The pan contained a hash of meat and rice. They called Kees de Kaap and the three of them made short work of this windfall. The gnome was probably filthy but his grub was all right; it certainly put heart into a man amidst all this gloom.

The wind whistled malevolently through the rigging, the swell became choppy and confused, and the sky was full of scurrying clouds, tinged with patches of greenish light. The menace Jan faced was frightening and exhilarating at the same time—for this was his first command.

Jan Wandelaar: twenty-five years old and already a Captain—life was good.

At nine the tugboat flashed the order to shorten sail. The order was superfluous, really, for the *Scottish Maiden* caught up with the *Jan* so fast now, with every gust, that they could have hailed one another but for the hell-cat screaming of the wind in the rigging.

To take in the lower and staysails was no easy task; the emergency crew were too seasick to stand and they needed both hands to hang on to the rails. With his two deck-hands, and eventually a couple of the roughs from down below who seemed to have realized that their lives were at stake, Jan managed the foresails, hanging in the foot-ropes over the yards.

It was a tough job and after they had furled the mainsail, the staysails, and the cro'jack they were beaten by the spanker. A treacherous squall hit the ship like the blast of an explosion. There was a report like a gun shot, a tearing screech that suggested the death-yell of a monster—and the lashings of the spanker hung flapping in the breast-backstays, like giant birds in agony.

That was a bitter blow: to keep this wild horse hove to

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without a spanker might well prove to be impossible. They scrambled up the ratlines and were tossed about like plums on a branch that was being shaken by a madman. They clung to the backstays for dear life, and managed to hack and tear the tatters of the spanker out of the shrouds.

By the time they had finished, there blew a strong gale that made the *Scottish Maiden* catch up with the tug as fast on her bare rigging as she did with her sails set an hour before.

The night was pitch dark; huge mountains of water battered her hull, leaping sky-high and crashing down on the deck with peals of thunder, and with a force that made the masts tremble like flagpoles.

The ship pitched and tossed; her top-lights streaked like comets across the sky; everything on board that could shift, began to roll about; everything that was hanging loose clanked and rattled.

The *Jan van Gent* could only be spotted at odd moments whenever a rift was torn in the clouds, and a splash of moonlight came racing across the water, picking out for an instant a foam-smothered black creature with its ghostly ray, then racing off again into darkness beyond.

Gone were the joy and the pride of the first command: there was nothing left in the world but a desperate ship, fighting for her life, and water, water, always more water, and higher and angrier seas foaming, whirling, crashing, seething—a deluge, the end of the world.

Jan tried to hold the wheel with Bulle Brega, he felt that the *Jan van Gent* was pulling at right angles, she couldn't keep the tow hove to. He heard a shot in the terrific din, but couldn't think where it came from; then he saw, through the deluge of flying water, a glow ahead, a ruddy gleam, flickering on and off, like flames in the wind. Lightning? It couldn't be that—it must be fire from the funnel of the tug.

And then a man came to the companion, like an apparition out of hell. He dragged himself hand over hand along the rails on the leeside. Three breakers nearly washed him into the beyond, but the man wouldn't let himself be caught and each time he popped up again from his refuge behind the rails, where he had been squatting down patiently, until he could seize his chance.

When he finally reached the companion he turned out to be Kees de Kaap, who told them, yelling each word through his cupped hands, that the *Jan van Gent* had been thrown cross-seas, that she was tearing her guts out but couldn't heave them to any more. Now the wire towing-hawser was tearing their

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stem, striking sparks, and within a few minutes they'd be cut adrift.

So that explained the fire-glow ahead: sparks struck off the pitching stem by the wire. The shot he heard must have been the dolphin-striker giving way. The realization brought one fleeting moment of justifiable pride; he was jolly well right when he wanted to lock the hawser to the anchor-chain. But the satisfaction didn't last long—for if they were cut loose, there would be a windjammer adrift in a hurricane with three sound men on board and a choir of seasick pastry-cooks to sing their requiem.

He thought of dropping the anchors, but the idea was knocked out of his head when a shudder shook the ship. The helm spun with the force of a paddle-wheel, and Bulle Brega was hurled, God preserve him, head over heels into the night.

The gale howled in the rigging, swirled the ship cross-seas and pressed so hard on her that she seemed to be nearly flattened. The two men, hanging on the eye-bolts of the companion that dipped precipitously, looked right down into the raging sea. Then the ship trembled, tried to stagger back on her keel, only to be flattened down once more with an even dizzier list.

For some men the sea waits in vain. After Jan had been bowled over by a great weight of water he realized, as soon as he could breathe again, that not only was he still hanging on to that deck and the ship had not capsized yet, but that someone was lying by his side, and that someone was Bulle Brega. He dragged himself with his two men to the weather-side rail and tried from there to reach a mast.

When the *Jan van Gent*, more like a half-submerged seal than a ship, lurched past, wheezing and rolling, the *Scottish Maiden* was hoisting staysails—quite an achievement for three men. Those staysails meant salvation to the *Scottish Maiden*, and to the stokers of the *Jan van Gent* ordeal by fire; for Siemonov yelled for ever more steam—the windjammer raced away on her few rags with such a speed that her top-lights, feeble glow-worms in the darkness, threatened to vanish out of sight.

The sea and the gale, robbed of their prey, continued other pranks, including the uprooting of the topmasts. The *Scottish Maiden*, with Jan and Kees and Bulle clinging to her kicking wheel like men drowning, took the giant waves like a steeple-chaser taking fences—ally-oop, and she was over. Then came a wave so high that she seemed to stand up on her hind legs. She threatened to turn turtle, but managed to scramble onto the crest, and was hurled down into a void so deep that she seemed to be flying.

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Then, an earthquake, a deafening collision, and a thundering avalanche of topmasts, yards, cordage, and tons of canvas, crumpled down upon her deck. Another wave like a landslide, and she went right under from stem to stern.

When she emerged again she had a pile of debris on her poop as high as a house, and was dragging a tangled mass behind her. But from the ruins three minute figures wriggled themselves free, and started hacking and tugging and fumbling.

Now that all the overhead stuff had come down and been washed overboard, she kept a lot steadier. She ran without fuss and obeyed the helm. Bulle Brega had a dislocated arm and Jan had had to cut Kees free from a rope that had caught his leg and threatened to drag him overboard. The ship seemed to be deserted except for the three of them.

But who was this, crawling from his hole?—The mole with the bonnet and the gory apron! He hauled himself along the rail towards the poop with one hand, while in the other he carried a kettle of coffee to revive their spirits. He didn't say anything —there was still too much noise in the universe for conversation —he merely handed the kettle to Jan and shuffled back, one hand on the rail.

The sea and gale, as if abashed by such a stroke of boldness, let him pass unharmed. Only when the mole had vanished into his hole did they start again to rage and roar. The world was full of marvels, and the cook was one of them.

Anyone who thought the worst was over now was mistaken. True, the wind didn't freshen any more during the rest of the night, but the seas became higher as they got farther away from the land. In the end it was impossible to stand, for the ship tossed and pitched so much. But as she kept a steady course and no change of sail seemed called for, Jan and Kees de Kaap lashed themselves to the wheel. Heaven knew where they were sailing to at twelve knots—the avalanche of the rigging had smashed the compass cover and knocked a few spokes out of the wheel, but it still turned, and the ship obeyed.

Bulle had gone off to the foc'sle with his dislocated arm, to find out if any of the pastry-cooks were still sufficiently alive to push the joint back in its place.

The *Jan van Gent* was nowhere to be seen; perhaps she had thought, when she saw the wreckage floating by, that the disaster in that wave-trough had been the end of them. The pitching and rolling became worse the more the wind dropped; an eerie, jerky tossing, with frightening joltings and sickening lurches.

Within an hour they were squinting with headache. Queer, mad thoughts obsessed their brains: *Don't fall asleep, don't fall*

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asleep; hell, what a headache; don't fall asleep; no spokes here; all spokes gone; dammit, don't fall asleep. In front of their eyes little red eels started wriggling and squirming, swimming worms in a streaky fog.

It was hours before they saw again, and when they did see, the sight that met them was the day breaking. Yellow and tear-smudged with rain, a faltering glimmer in a storm-torn sky. Then the question came to Jan. How could he possibly see the dawn when they were heading west? He tried to look down and when he had managed it he realized that he was hanging back to front on the wheel; Kees de Kaap hung the other way round, with a rolling head and dangling arms, fast asleep. But the moment a sail quivered he turned the ship away from the wind, like an automaton.

Towards sunrise things were at their worst. The ship swayed so wildly that one of the mizzen-shrouds—the mizzen-top was the only one left—snapped like a gun shot. One more of those lurches and the whole lot would snap, and once the mast got loose on the weather-side, it was then good-bye to everything. The only solution would be to lower the topmast in order to lessen the sway. But he hadn't got the courage or the legs, and now that his eye had got fixed on that topmast it just stuck there, because he was too tired to look away.

Yes, yes,—he knew, of course. Jan, boy, if you don't lower that topmast it will be good-bye. He wanted to do it all right; but just couldn't. Then fate gave him a shove.

The thin Captain strutted the deck, like a cock, after a night with his head in his feathers, to greet the dawn with drunken crowing. He was so drunk that he walked the swaying deck with an ease impossible to any sober man; he just didn't notice that the world was awash. He had spotted two pirates at the helm of his ship and was making tracks towards them in order to assert his authority.

The appearance of this melancholy rooster brought Jan back to his senses, in the same way as Bulle Brega's resurrection had jolted him into action during the night. He detached himself from Kees and the wheel and tried to get hold of the drunkard before he missed a step and found himself washed overboard.

But a revengeful wave came swirling over the rail, knocking the Captain off his feet and hurling him into a corner, where he floundered in a bath of hissing foam, as if he were condemned for his sins to drown in a flood of beer. The same wave caused another of the shrouds to snap with a twang; now death was strumming the two remaining chords with an ominous sound.

Jan forgot the Captain and shook Kees, and they lashed the

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wheel so that it would steer the ship unattended for a while, and clambered up the ratlines. To lower that topmast might cost both of them their lives; but if they didn't take the risk the end was certain. They were tossed about so ferociously on the mizzen-top that they lost all sense of height and space. After five minutes of frantic work all they seemed to be doing was to cling on, desperately, to the pendulum of a huge clock which was trying to shake them off and fling them into hell—then clock, pendulum and all crashed out of the sky.

Surely this was the end. But no, it was nothing. All they had done was to lower the topmast, as they set out to do. They looked at each other with sheepish faces, as they hung on to a pole that turned out to be the cross-tree which was caught in a jungle of ropes. The resinous smell of splintered wood was their first sensation in a new world. "Done it!" Kees said, and the thunder of the flapping sails sounded like gigantic applause.

When they set foot on deck again the sea seemed to have quietened down all of a sudden, for they could stroll up and down as easily as the drunken Captain did. Kees took the wheel again and put her back on her course; Jan went to get help to cope with the devastation. The foc'sle was still cut off by the surf. Jan hammered on the door of the galley.

The mole popped his head out and understood everything, even before it had been turned into English: he shuffled to the wheel, with the same disdain for the elements he had shown when he brought the coffee, and took over from Kees with the casualness of a man who had done this sort of thing before.

Kees and Jan dragged the Captain—still miraculously alive in the shelter of the rail—to the hatchway of the cabin, opened the doors, and let go of him. He rolled down the staircase, with a thud and a splash at the bottom, and having thus got rid of him they shut the door again with a funereal reverence. Then they attacked the tangle on deck with a feeling of superiority.

Half an hour later the deck was clear. The sea looked played out; the swell was subsiding and the gale had dropped to a stiff breeze. It might be an illusion, that the crisis was over, but for Jan the tension had gone and the indifference of exhaustion overpowered him. The mole had married himself to that wheel—no worry there, he'd sail on till doomsday and never bat an eye. Jan waded with Kees de Kaap to the foc'sle to look for Bulle Brega, with a lantern.

The emergency crew lay scattered on the floor, like corpses—a sorry spectacle of scared, filthy men whom terror and seasickness had turned into animals for a night, and who now, exhausted and overcome, lay miserably snoring wherever fate had toppled

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them. Bulle Brega was found in a lower bunk, where he must have dragged himself and where, having fainted with pain, he remained until they hauled him out. His shoulder looked ugly and they dared not fumble with it; best thing was to leave him, in case by moving him they made matters worse.

Kees de Kaap wouldn't sleep. He stayed on deck to keep an eye on the mole and the sails. The mizzen-mast was all right now; the ship was responsive, and there was no need to dodge the wind. They could head for somewhere now—but where?

The *Jan van Gent* was nowhere within sight, nor was the coast. The breeze must be south-westerly, but it was impossible to be certain, for the compass was useless. They must be making five to six knots, close to the wind; the *Scottish Maiden* seemed to revel in it.

Behind them the sky was still pitch black. The waves were green monsters, veined like marble, with sparkling crests of foam. The black clouds held half the horizon locked in their embrace, so that the ship seemed to be sailing out of the arms of a dark power.

But ahead, to the west, where the shore ought to be, there was nothing. An endless plain of teeming water, blue, shining, merging into an endless sky, pure with light. No horizon, not a ship, not a bird. Nothing but the sky and the waves; a boundless expanse of waves, swelling, curling and sinking, as far as the eye could see.

Jan wanted to make a reckoning by taking the sun. But in the chart-room none of the instruments was to be found; the sea had rammed in the doors and cleaned it out. A few tatters of charts dangled like weeds from the racks under the ceiling, a chair with broken legs had hidden itself underneath the table—that was all.

He swayed on his feet from exhaustion. He lowered himself into the cabin; there sprawled the Captain, laid out on the couch, like a corpse.

It was quiet in the cabin, eerily quiet; no sound but the singing in his ears and the muffled roll and thud of a bottle, rolling backwards and forwards against the wall, moved by the swell. Seeing the man, he couldn't repress a certain pride, and he said: "Captain, your ship is saved."

At first the Captain didn't seem to have heard, then he said with a startling authority: "Go home, you fool."

As Jan, after a moment of indecision, swallowed down an answer and started opening the drawers under the bunk, looking for a sextant, the Captain said: "Once the finest vessel afloat: now better lost, yes—lost. God, let her be lost. Go home,

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you fool, go home." And there was no sextant either; better to sail blind, hoping for the best. The tug couldn't stay over the horizon for ever.

Next to the coat-hooks hung a portrait with its glass splintered. An old-fashioned woman with three old-fashioned children. Seeing that portrait he thought of Nellie, for the first time that night. As he dragged himself up the stairs he wondered why that should be. He had always been told that at the moment of death a vision of one's beloved floats before the eyes with a smile of comfort and consolation. He had felt the hand of the dark angel on his shoulder at least three times that night, but there had been no vision of Nellie to comfort him.

He wasn't too weary to make excuses for his broken promise. If it wasn't even worth her while to have a fleeting little dream about him, with seaweed in his hair, then there was nothing for it but to do his manly duty, without sentimental restrictions.

Yet it didn't quite work, this sensible reflection; he stretched himself on the bench in the chart-room with an uneasy conscience, until he fell asleep. And that wasn't long.

Towards evening the *Jan van Gent* caught up with them again. The men on both ships hailed one another. At the third attempt a line was taken aboard and was hauled in without much trouble. When the tug started pulling again, the bo'sun arrived with a boat.

"Hullo, Bo'sun."

"Hullo, Mate, any damage?"

"Not too bad, thanks."

"Hullo, Kees."

When Jan saw Siemonov again they shook hands. So they should. And they had a drink. So they jolly well should.

Bout said: "Look who's here."

The Chief said: "Now you have seen for yourself, young fellow; if only this slave-driving . . ."

But Nellie made no comment; she looked out of her frame with an odd expression. Don't you worry, she'd have enough to say when the time came; lucky fellow to have five months in which to think up an answer.

Little Abel said: "What did I tell you? Go easy with those Scottish wenches."

And Bulle Brega pulled a face as if he were laughing. But he gave a hell of a yell when Siemonov put a stockinged foot in his arm-pit and did some rope-pulling on his bad arm.

"Do you know why the Sultan of Turkey has only midgets to serve him in his harem?" little Abel asked cheerfully. And

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when Bulle didn't know, he said: "Because they are too small to look in the beds. Ha ha ha!" But Bulle didn't laugh; Bulle had fainted.

Kees de Kaap had tears in his eyes and went on deck rather than watch that torture. Ostensibly he'd gone on deck to ask cook if he wouldn't rather fry an egg for the casualty, instead of moping over the rail like that. Cook said: "Fry an egg? That man will be out for the count for the next ten hours."

Cook was a bit unhappy, for he had lost his bowler hat. Funny, the way one gets attached to a thing like that; in the end it becomes almost like a dog.

And then Bout's voice called from the engine-room: "Boys, just hand down a bucket of water, will you?" Henkie exclaimed: "That's the Third Engineer, sick again!" And the bo'sun said: "You stay out of this, sonny, and go and do what you're told."

Eight months at sea is a long time. Sometimes Jan wept in his bunk, hiding his face in his pillow. But who can blame him? For heroism in itself is no cure for a lonely heart. And for someone as young as he, and so newly-married, you must admit he hadn't done badly.

* * *

ANSWERS to DAMSELS IN DISPUTE

on page 20

1. *Molly Seagrim, in "The History of Tom Jones," by Henry Fielding.*
2. *Miss Trotwood, in "David Copperfield," by Charles Dickens.*
3. *Hermia, in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," by William Shakespeare.*
4. *Lucy Lockit nearly poisons Polly Peachum, in "The Beggar's Opera," by John Gay.*
5. *Gagool, in "King Solomon's Mines," by H. Rider Haggard.*
6. *Mrs. Rochester, in "Jane Eyre," by Charlotte Brontë.*
7. *Britomart, in "The Faerie Queene," by Edmund Spenser.*
8. *Liza, in "Liza of Lambeth," by W. Somerset Maugham.*
9. *Alice shakes the Red Queen, in "Through the Looking-Glass," by Lewis Carroll.*

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LIGHT OF LOVE

And if I loved you Wednesday
Well, what is that to you?
I do not love you Thursday,
So much is true.

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY, *Thursday*

In Lydia's imagination, a visit to Brighton comprised every possibility of earthly happiness. She saw, with the creative eye of fancy, the streets of that gay bathing-place covered with officers. She saw herself the object of attention to tens and to scores of them at present unknown. She saw all the glories of the camp—its tents stretched forth in beauteous uniformity of lines, crowded with the young and the gay, and dazzling with scarlet; and, to complete the view, she saw herself seated beneath a tent, tenderly flirting with at least six officers at once.

JANE AUSTEN, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813

Protesting too Much

I hate inconstancy—I loathe, detest,
Abhor, condemn, abjure the mortal made
Of such quicksilver clay, that in his breast
No permanent foundation can be laid;
Love, constant love, has been my constant guest,
And yet, last night, being at a masquerade,
I saw the prettiest creature, fresh from Milan,
Which gave me some sensations like a villain.

LORD BYRON, *Don Juan*

On the Wing

When I was in France, just after I was married, there happened to be amongst our acquaintance a gay, sprightly girl, of about seventeen. I was remonstrating with her, one day, on the facility with which she seemed to shift her smiles from object to object; and she, stretching one arm out in an upward direction, the other in a downward direction, raising herself upon one foot, leaning her body on one side, and thus throwing herself into a flying attitude, answered my grave lecture by singing, in a very sweet voice the following lines from the vaudeville, in the play of Figaro:

Si l'amour a des ailes,
N'est-ce pas pour voltiger?

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that is, if love has wings, is it not to flutter about with? The wit, argument, and manner, all together, silenced me. She, after I left France, married a very worthy man, has had a large family, and has been, and is, a most excellent wife and mother. But that which does sometimes well in France does not do here at all. Our manners are more grave: steadiness is the rule, and levity the exception. Love may voltige in France; but in England it cannot, with safety to the lover . . .

WILLIAM COBBETT, 1762–1835,
Advice to a Lover

Morning After

Why dost thou say I am forsworn,
Since thine I vow'd to be?
Lady, it is already morn;
It was last night I swore to thee
That fond impossibility.

Yet I have loved thee well, and long;
A tedious twelve-hours' space!
I should all other beauties wrong,
And rob thee of a new embrace,
Did I still doat upon that face.

RICHARD LOVELACE, 1618–58

Scant Justice

He arrived in two carriages; in one he travelled with his dog, in the other, his French cook with his parrots. The people of Perm were delighted at the arrival of a wealthy visitor, and soon all the town was crowding into his dining-room. Dolgoruky got up an affair with a young lady at Perm; the latter, suspecting some infidelity, appeared unexpectedly at the prince's house one morning and found him with his housemaid. This led to a scene which ended in the faithless lover taking his riding-whip from the wall; the lady, seeing his intention, took to flight, he followed her, scantily attired in a dressing-gown; overtaking her in the little square in which the battalion were usually drilled, he gave the jealous lady three or four lashes with the whip and calmly returned home as though he had done his duty.

ALEXANDER HERZEN, *My Past and Thoughts*,
translated by CONSTANCE GARNETT

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Next, Please

It was light very late, and there was one of the loveliest sunsets. The trees were quite still and the sky was glowing. I kept getting out of bed to look. Each time the rising moon was a little brighter. The flowers began to smell in the hedgerow opposite, and the birds to be quiet. It was exquisite. Suddenly, through the open doorway, I noticed a vague patch of moonlight on the wall. I fancied it was a girl, standing soft and naked. When I looked it was nothing like it, of course. I smiled at myself. And from the window came a gust of air, blowing over my body. My imagination stirred violently, and a new thought burst in like a shooting-star. "I must look for someone else."

WILLIAM COOPER, *Scenes from Provincial Life*

Plus ça Change—

Tell mee noe more of Constancy,
The frivolous pretence
Of Cold Age, narrow Jealouzy,
Disease, & want of Sense.

Let duller Fooles, on whom kind chance
Some easy Heart hath throwne,
Synce they noe higher can advance,
Be kind to one alone . . .

And Wee, whose Hearts doe justly swell
With noe vaineglorious pride,
Knowing, how Wee in Love excell,
Long, to bee often try'd.

Then bring my Bath, & strew my Bed,
As each kind Night returnes.
I'le change a Mistresse, till I'me dead,
And Fate change mee to Wormes.

JOHN WILMOT, EARL OF ROCHESTER, 1648–80

—Plus c'est la Même Chose

"He was the great love of her life, you know."

"Oh, dulling," said my mother, sadly. "One always thinks that. Every, every time."

NANCY MITFORD, *The Pursuit of Love*

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ALARM SIGNAL

Through the pale dawn the man was running helplessly

by ROWAN AYERS

FROM some far corner of the night, the hooter began to swell out like a huge suffocating flower, reaching into the brain, choking the swift volatile images of dreams, invading the body with ice-cold tendrils of fear.

Sandra heard it first as she struggled out of the dark empty cave of sleep, groping blindly towards some surface of consciousness where the hurtful, unrelenting whine of the alarm would register, and transform her into action. But for the first second she lay stiff and numb, allowing the scream to overwhelm her muscles, passively accepting the mounting wave of disaster that must be building up outside. Then, in a desperate lunge of self-preservation, she twisted out of the bed, snatched at the dressing-gown behind the door, pushed her feet into slippers, and surged out into the passage in one long fluid movement.

She was aware of others, ghost-like, as pale as moths in the dim glow of the dawn light, gliding swiftly down the stairs, murmuring, partly to blunt the needle-sharp prong of the hooter's note and partly to reassure themselves. Sandra felt them brush against her, as they clustered into the narrow bottle-neck of the shelter hatchway.

One by one they descended, hushed and anonymous, no longer aware of official relationships, no longer mindful of the agony of suspense between that first cry of the alarm and the effort to react.

It might be minutes still before the explosion. It might be seconds. There was no means of predicting, no simple stop-watch routine to assess the speed of the appalling build-up of heat and energy that must first have melted the safety wax in the cylinder itself and set off the warning.

Nor was there any means of knowing what the force and violence of the explosion would be when it came. The shelter was theoretically adequate. It had been designed well beyond the minimum requirements for safety. But it was untried. There had never been an explosion at Killochan before. There had never been an atomic explosion anywhere in the British Isles . . .

Sandra sat down in one of the large leather chairs that stood

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against the shelter wall. The yellow light from the naked bulb filled the room with an unearthly sickliness. Beneath it, faces looked old and ill, eyes empty and sightless.

" Anyone missing? " asked Baxter. It was the first sound of an official voice. Until this, there had been no suggestion of command or control.

The faces turned and twisted, probing the shadows beside them; calculating, counting, inquiring.

" Nineteen," said someone from the far end of the room.

" Who's not here? "

More quick deliberation, more murmurs. Above them, muted now, the muffled hooter whined on, unwavering.

Sandra looked from face to face. Some in that blood-sucking light, were barely recognizable.

But she knew instinctively that the one she was looking for would not be there.

" Dr. Dallaway? " said Baxter. " Where's Dallaway? "

There was a split second of utter silence; a frozen question-mark standing arched in the centre of the shelter.

" Not here."

" Dr. Dallaway hasn't come down."

Sandra drew in her breath. She understood that he wouldn't be there. He would be somewhere outside, between the house and the laboratories, running across the soft spongy lawn towards the concrete buildings beyond. He would have no sense of fear, only anger at not knowing what could have gone wrong. Even at the last minute he would be checking detail, trying to discover where the fault lay. He would be there when the last resistance crumbled, when the earth and the air about him disintegrated in a holocaust of fire and fury.

She dug her nails into the palms of her hands and waited.

" We can't leave the hatch open any longer," said Baxter. His voice was crumbling; dry and dusty.

" But Dallaway's not down yet."

" We can't risk it—"

He moved swiftly up the steep stairs to the hatch-cover, looked once into the gloom, and then slamming the lid down above him, began to screw up the lock that would seal them off securely from the lethal gamma-rays that might penetrate the lower regions of the house.

With the hatch-cover shut, the shelter became suddenly silent. Even the soft electric hum of the air-conditioning plant seemed to have lowered its mechanical voice.

Baxter stood at the foot of the steps and turned to the rest of the assembled staff.

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'It may be some minutes," he said quietly, "before the balloon goes up. Everyone should try to relax. We don't know how long we shall have to stay here afterwards . . ."

Sandra tried to shut it all out of her mind. She thought back to her childhood, to the long summer days at the edge of the sea, to the idiotic world of make-believe she and her sister had inhabited in the tree-house at the bottom of the garden. She tried to remember the soft scent of spring and the lazy whine of the lawn-mower. The sense of total security she had enjoyed before growing up. It was a momentary consolation to shut out the world of maturity, to ignore the present, to disregard the absurd and unbelievable situation that had now sent her scurrying for safety some eighty feet below ground, while above her, some hundreds of yards away in the pale dawn-lit grounds, the only man she had ever loved ran helplessly to his inevitable destruction.

And yet, somehow, she had always known it would be like this. Even at that first interview, over two years ago, she had seen it in his face. It was the face of a martyr, a man prepared to live and die for his work. Mere human beings would never count. They were illogical and unpredictable, and he was a scientist.

Was it really two years ago? It seemed much less. She could remember so clearly the startled look he had given her when she was first shown into his office. She could remember, too, the strange, halting compliment he had paid her at the end of the interview.

"Miss Collins," he had said, "I must admit I was expecting someone a great deal less attractive."

And yet it wasn't exactly a compliment. It was more of a caution.

Killochan, he explained, was an isolated, self-contained unit. The staff of men and women had to work and live together in the closest possible harmony. There could be no distraction. No personal problems. Nothing to interrupt or in any way impede the work.

"You must regard this as a vocation," he told her, "and not just a means of earning your living. Everything else, even your private life, must take second place."

He had not actually said that falling in love was forbidden, but the implication was there. She understood and accepted the position. It was the research that mattered. Upon the results of the work at Killochan the whole peace and safety of the world might ultimately depend. Sometimes it had frightened her to think that one slight error in calculation, one formula insufficiently

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resolved, might retard the progress of the human race for many years.

But at last she had become, like the others, completely objective. The world at Killochan bore no relation to the world outside. It was a remote and unrelated community.

Sandra closed her eyes and allowed the hum of the ventilating machinery to drum into her head. It was strangely soothing, like a vibro-massage, obliterating the need to think, or act, or speculate. Beyond it, as at the end of a long narrow corridor, she could hear the quiet whispers of the others in the shelter, punctuated from time to time by some remark from Donald Baxter.

"I'll try Number One Post," she heard Baxter saying, and was aware of his movement towards the shelter telephone.

He won't be there, she wanted to say. He won't be anywhere except down at the laboratory. And he wouldn't be concerned about answering the telephone even if he heard it ringing. He hated the telephone. It insinuated its way into his life, uncompromisingly. It had been the telephone that had first given her some insight into the life behind his impenetrable mask.

It happened on one hot Sunday afternoon soon after she had come back from a long walk. He had been waiting for her at the front door of the house, and had hustled her into the heavy oak-panelled room that was his office.

"Read these," he said, even before she had had time to take off her hat; and gave her a sheaf of papers on which he had made a number of complicated calculations and notes.

As she sat in the chair and began to read, he hovered at her elbow. Occasionally he had become impatient, and attempted to force some reaction from her, but she had remained silent, trying to piece together the data he had assembled, and to draw some sort of conclusion.

Then the telephone suddenly burst into the room with its strident clamour.

He snatched it angrily. "Hullo. Yes, Dallaway here. What? Where is she?"

Sandra looked up at him. His voice sounded suddenly different.

"I see," he was saying. "Yes, I think you'd better put Mr. Baxter on, will you?"

He looked anxiously across the room to Sandra, and for a moment she saw that the mask had dropped. Behind it was something totally unexpected, the face of fear. She watched him, fascinated and astonished.

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"Hullo, Baxter? I understand she's at the main gate. With you? No, of course you can't, man. I don't care. It's out of the question. No one's allowed in without full authorization, you know that as well as I do. No, I don't want to speak to her. Tell her I'm busy, and tell her she's not allowed in—in any circumstances."

He was about to hang up when something Baxter said arrested him. Sandra saw him open his mouth, as if to protest. It was some seconds before he asked, "Are you sure?"

He had turned to her appealingly.

"Perhaps you'd better," he said slowly, and added, "no, I'll come down to the main gate. You'd better wait with her, Baxter. I'll be down in a few minutes."

He lowered the receiver quietly, and stood for a moment with his hand still resting on the stand. Sandra was watching him, until, becoming aware of her gaze, he shook himself back to reality.

"Well?" he snapped. "Haven't you finished it yet?"

Sandra made no attempt to look at the notes. She had seen for the first time the sadness in his face, and she wanted to help him. He was suddenly stripped of his confidence and courage, suddenly left without armour of any sort. It was the first time it had ever occurred to her that there was more in his life than the mission he had embarked upon, the mission of applying atomic energy to peaceful and domestic uses. In those few uncomfortable seconds, he had become transformed. He had become human.

"Can I help in any way?" she asked quietly.

He looked surprised and angry. "Help? How the devil do you mean, help?"

"I thought," she said, trying to steer back into routine channels, "I thought you weren't looking well."

"I'm all right," he said, gruffly, turning away. "Perfectly all right. Why the hell shouldn't I be?"

She looked down at the notes again. The numbers and patterns of his calculations crossed and re-crossed each other in a meaningless disorder.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm afraid I haven't been concentrating."

Dallaway became irritable at once.

"Well, for heaven's sake, try!" he said. "It's about the most important advance we've made so far."

She turned back to the last page she could remember, and began to pick up the argument again.

She wondered how long he would stay in the room before he decided to go down to the main gate to meet whoever it was. His

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wife? His mother? His fiancée? She had, somehow, never connected him with any woman.

"Well?" she heard him say over her shoulder. He was deliberately goading her on, driving her away from that instant of personal contact. It was part of his policy to keep everything under strictly disciplined control, even his emotions.

"I'm afraid I'm a little lost at the moment," she said, stalling. "I haven't been able to cross-check these numbers. They don't seem to be consistent."

"Of course they're not!" he said angrily. "They're variable. That's the crux of the theory. That's where we've all been so wrong till now. Look at that plutonium number, for instance. In all normal stages it's 94. That's what we've worked on for years. Now, introduce alpha-particles at a ratio of two to one, and look at the formula again . . ."

She looked up at him standing aggressively above her. "Dr. Dallaway," she said quietly, "don't you think it would be better if I took this and studied it? It needs a lot of thought . . ."

"No, I don't," he snapped. "I want to get on. Why the devil do you think I showed it to you today?"

She knew he was lying. He wanted her to stay there.

She provided an excuse, something to keep him from going down to the main gate.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, "but I seem awfully slow this afternoon."

He turned and went back to his desk. "Sandra," he said quietly, "I must ask you to forgive me." It was the first time he had ever called her by her Christian name. It sounded fantastic and unreal. "I'm afraid," he went on, "I'm being very unreasonable."

She put the notes down beside the chair and stood up to face him. "I understand," she said. "There's nothing to forgive."

For a moment they remained watching each other, silently.

"You know," he said at last, "that I've come to rely on you a hell of a lot, don't you? Perhaps too much. I don't know."

Suddenly there was a knock on the door and Baxter came in. "She's here," he said nervously.

Dallaway blinked, unbelievingly. "Here? What on earth do you mean? Where is she now?" he asked.

There was no time for an answer. The door opened and she was there. Tall, elegant, flawlessly beautiful. An exotic flower, with petals of poison.

"Hullo, Terry," she said. "Nice to see you, darling." It was skilfully casual, almost playful.

"You shouldn't be here," said Dallaway. "You're not authorized to come here."

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She smiled. "Of course not, darling. But there are generally ways and means of getting round silly little regulations like that." She glanced quickly at Baxter. "Besides, it's most inconsiderate of you not to want to see me, after all this time."

She moved a few paces into the room. "Of course," she went on, looking at Sandra, "if I've interrupted anything, I'm terribly sorry, but it's most important that I see you . . . alone."

Dallaway was standing behind his desk now, as if the familiarity of it gave him strength. From there he was all-powerful, unassailable.

"Get out," he said quietly. "You've no right to come here. No right at all."

She took out a cigarette and lit it carefully.

"You seem to be forgetting yourself, Terry," she said, "when you start talking about rights. I always understood a wife had some sort of right to be with her husband, whatever the circumstances."

"Get out, Marion," he said, more firmly, "before I have you arrested for breaking into the station."

She laughed. "My dear Terry, don't be so absurdly melodramatic. I haven't broken in. This charming friend of yours personally escorted me to the house . . ."

Dallaway's face had become set and hard. The mask had returned. "Miss Collins," he said, turning to Sandra, "I think perhaps you and Mr. Baxter had better leave us for the moment."

Sandra walked towards the door. She felt lost and powerless. She was shocked and hurt, and afraid for him; but there was nothing she could do. She had no right to interfere.

As she left the room she turned once more and looked at him. In his eyes there was an apology. An apology and an appeal. She knew that he wanted her to help, that he still relied on her, that they were now in fact far closer to each other than they had ever dared acknowledge.

Outside in the corridor Donald turned to her and shrugged. "Well, well, well," he said, "Who'd have thought it of him? He certainly knows how to pick 'em."

Sandra went up to her own room. She lay down on her bed and began, very gently, to cry.

Dallaway had never referred to the incident again. It was almost as if it had never happened; as if Sandra had dreamt it all. Between them there was once again the impenetrable, official barrier.

At the station, Dallaway went ahead with his new theories. New equipment was installed in Number Two Chamber, and

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several preliminary experiments were made in an entirely new sphere. But behind the apparent smoothness and success of the experiments there was a new and more sinister implication. Until then there had never been any real danger at Killochan. All the practical tests had been on a small and comparatively harmless scale. But with the institution of the new process in Number Two Chamber, a perpetual action and reaction had to take place: there was no question of shutting off the current. And if it were ever allowed to get out of control . . .

"Of course," Dallaway had confided to her one day, "we still don't know how to control this force completely. We're safe as long as we can keep it within certain limits, but the minute it is allowed to build up beyond those limits, as it might very well do, we shall no longer be in charge."

"You mean, there will be an explosion?"

Dallaway shrugged. "Maybe worse than just one isolated explosion. It might mean the disintegration of a whole area of land about us, for several miles. And it might not even stop there.

"Theoretically," he went on, "it's possible for it to destroy the whole of the British Isles."

He looked at her almost benevolently. "But that is something only you and I know. And only you and I *must* know. I've prepared a convincing argument to prove that in the event of any trouble it will probably be strictly localized."

"Then . . . the shelter wouldn't be any good?"

He smiled. "It may be. And it may not be. I simply wouldn't know at this stage."

In spite of her fears, she found it strangely comforting to talk to him about it. He was calm and impassive and strictly impersonal. There was no trace of fear, or anxiety at the enormous responsibility he was shouldering.

"If, by any unfortunate chance," he added one evening, after they had checked the cadmium neutralizers in the chamber, "something did begin to get out of hand, I should want you to go to the shelter. You'd stand a much better chance down there."

"And you?"

They were standing close to each other. Almost too close. Sandra felt he couldn't move either towards her or away from her without making the gesture seem significant. "I shall be all right," he said simply. "I've never been afraid of dying . . ."

She knew it would be dangerous to intrude upon his life. No distractions. No personal problems. Those were his rules. He had even excluded his wife. Shut her out of his life. There could be no compromise. Whatever they knew and felt they must keep

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for ever to themselves. Even those few moments of understanding, those suggestions of sympathy they had shared. There could never be anything more between them. No mutual alliance. No declarations. They must remain for ever isolated from each other.

Somewhere in the shelter the telephone bell rang harshly. She wasn't sure if she'd slept, or whether she'd remembered all this in a split second of time.

Baxter's voice sounded muted and unreal as he answered. "Yes, speaking. Yes, sir, all except you. Where, sir? Number Two? Yes, she's here. I'll put her on."

Sandra had known, ever since the first strident blare of the hooter had wakened her, that he would send for her. In spite of their resolve, in spite of the struggle they had put up to keep themselves remote and unimportant to each other, it was implicit in their relationship that they would come together at the end.

"Sandra," said Baxter, holding out the telephone, "it's the Director. He wants a word with you."

She took the receiver. "Miss Collins here," she said slowly.

When Dallaway spoke, his voice was calm and purposeful. "Sandra," he said, "in the second drawer in my desk there's a sheaf of papers, mostly notes I've made in the past few weeks. On one of them there's a suggested formula for the breakdown, which may work if I can apply it immediately."

There was a pause. She said nothing. Her tongue was dry in her mouth.

"I want you to go up to the office and collect those notes and bring them down here to Number Two as quickly as possible. I shall need your help . . ."

Sandra tried to speak, but he had hung up.

She stood with the dead receiver in her hand, and felt the strength go out of her body.

Donald took her by the arm. "What's he want?" he asked, "And what the hell's he doing down there, anyway?"

"I'm going up," she said. "Will you unscrew the hatch?"

Donald gripped her more tightly. "Don't be crazy. There's nothing you can do. It may go off any second now. You'll never get there and back."

"Will you please unscrew the hatch?" she said, breaking free.

Donald stood in her way. "I forbid it," he said firmly. "Just because you're in love is no reason to go and get blown to smithereens with him—"

Sandra felt her strength returning. Swinging her hand, she brought it back across Donald's face with a force that made her fingers tingle with shock and pain. He stumbled away from her.

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Without heeding him, she climbed the narrow stairs to the hatch. With a few strong turns on the locking-wheel, the cover was loose. She squeezed through into the lower basement, and pushed the cover back into place behind her.

Blindly she climbed up into the main hall. The noise of the alarm hooter was deafening, filling the deserted house with a cascade of never-ending echoes. But she could think of nothing but the papers in Dallaway's desk, nothing but the urgency of getting them to him in time.

After that, whatever happened, she would be with him.

She found the folder, and tucking it under her arm, ran swiftly out of the house into the chilly dawn air.

Outside, it was strangely peaceful. The hooter had become muffled and blurred inside the house, and no longer carried the awful immediacy of alarm.

To the west, beyond the small rocky island off the coast, the last rim of the moon lay along the horizon, like some phantom whale arching its back before plunging into the depths; while to the east, a few pale bars of light rested along the summits of the distant hills.

It was fresh and serene. There was no suggestion of disaster, of the grotesque possibilities of the disintegration that might start at any moment. She ran on lightly, down the long soft lawn towards the concrete huts, through the small rocky blast-barrier that had originally been set up as a token security measure, and on towards Number Two.

Dallaway was at the door, waiting for her. In the pale light, his face looked unrecognizably young and happy. "Come on," he said, taking the papers from her, "where the hell have you been all this time?"

But there was now no anger in his voice. "Stand by Number Three feed," he said, as they entered the inner chamber where the cylinder sat on its three tubular legs.

Inside it, she knew, the energy had reached almost to maximum. At any second it would go beyond. Dallaway went over to the control panels and glanced at the dials.

"Oh, well," he said calmly, "we can't be right every time. According to these we should have gone up about a minute ago."

Sandra felt a sensation of numbness down her spine, a cold, paralysing immobility. Casually, almost dispassionately, she watched Dallaway poring over his calculations.

"Of course," he said, without looking up, "there's still a chance of getting back to the shelter if you make a bolt for it at once."

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She smiled. " Don't waste time chatting," she said. " I shall be catching my death of cold if something doesn't happen soon."

For a moment he turned and faced her. " This may not work," he said, quietly, " but it's worth a try. At least, there's nothing to lose at this stage. All ready? "

She nodded.

" When I tell you, open the feed-tap about halfway, and watch the pointers. If they move any further to the left, close it at once. I'll counteract from here with the dampers."

It was strange, thought Sandra, how unfrightened she was of death now that it was there beside her, waiting perhaps a few seconds only, before it touched her. It seemed odd that she had ever feared it. In a way, it would be a relief now. A relief from the appalling tension of not knowing . . .

" O.K.," said Dallaway. " Now."

Slowly she turned the small tap towards the right, watching the quivering needle on the dial above her head for any indication of a reaction. At first, it moved fractionally beyond the critical point.

" It's going," she called out.

Dallaway left his panel and ran to her. " There's bound to be a slight increase at first," he said, " but as long as it isn't too great, it may still work."

He looked anxiously at the needle. " Here," he said, taking her in his arms. She clung to him tightly, and rested her head on his shoulder.

" Sandra," he said quietly, " I want you to know that whatever happens I'm in love with you. I have been for a long time . . ."

" I know."

" We both know . . ." He held her tighter.

" But what—what about your wife? " she asked.

" That's all over," he said. " She came to tell me she wanted to marry again . . ." He looked over towards the panel. For a moment the needle still hovered beyond the danger point, and then, even as he watched, it began to jerk slowly back, slowly towards the normal.

" Can you tell anything yet? " she asked, sensing he was watching.

" Not at the moment," he lied, " but I think it might be rather dangerous if we moved . . ."

Sandra clung to him tightly. " Who wants to move? " she asked.

Back in the shelter beneath the house, Baxter was anxiously trying to get through to Number Two Chamber. The alarm

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had stopped, and it seemed, for the moment at any rate, that the emergency had passed. But there was no answer from Number Two.

"Go on ringing," one of the anxious staff was urging him. "Something terrible may have happened."

In the outer office of Number Two, the telephone bell was ringing endlessly, aimlessly. Dallaway had once made a move to answer it, but Sandra had stopped him.

"No distractions allowed," she reminded him.

"No personal problems either, remember?"

She looked up at him again. Over his shoulder she saw the needle flickering at normal. Somehow, it no longer seemed to matter whether they were safe or not. In their own private world, they were safe for ever . . .

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CHICKEN SUPREME

When I was a little girl I used to go every year with my father to Cowes for the sailing. Only upon rare occasions was I allowed to accompany him, but I had a little tricycle with the help of which I used to explore the country . . . On one of my expeditions I saw a pony-carriage containing an old lady and a large man. The pony carriage stopped, a gate was opened and, being curious—as most children are—I watched while a hamper was unpacked, a table improvised, a chair brought from the pony-carriage, and very soon I saw a lunch being eaten. I was very hungry and, after some conversation with the pony, browsing contentedly on the verge of the lane, I drew near to the gate. The old lady saw me and said: "Are you hungry, little girl?"

"Yes, I am," I said.

"Come in and join the picnic," she said. "There is plenty for you." And very soon I was enjoying chicken and sucking the bones, as I saw the old lady was sucking hers, and felt it was quite right for me to enjoy this extra pleasure which I was habitually denied. After I had said "good-bye" and "thank-you" I thought no more about it save that my own sandwiches appeared very dull and I gave them to a grateful dog which I met near home.

On Sunday, when I went to church at Whippingham with my father, my eye lit upon the old lady with whom I had sucked chicken-bones. I saw that my father was looking upon her in an unusually respectful manner.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"That is the Queen of England," he said.

NANCY PRICE, *Into an Hour Glass*

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SIX CONTENTED WIVES

Late that night, bathed and scented, she waited expectantly

by ARTHUR PIKE

AHMED RASHID was a wealthy merchant of ancient Damascus who possessed six wives of great beauty. Now, whilst endowed with all the manly graces, Ahmed was most parsimoniously inclined and found his greatest happiness in the contemplation of his silver and of the loveliness of his wives, but even as it grieved him to deplete his coffers by the smallest piece of silver, so was he rarely moved to taste the pleasures of connubial bliss.

Ahmed was alone in his contentment, for his highly-valued but little-loved wives, albeit secretly and with much heightening of colour, often resented the ornamental quality of their role in his household.

So matters might have continued indefinitely, had not a slight falling-off in the returns from Ahmed's investments in Baghdad wrought anguish in his miserly soul. Frequent and costly communications to his agent in that city resulted only in vague and evasive replies, so that after carefully weighing the cost of the journey against the possible saving in revenue, Ahmed decided to set forth for Baghdad to put his affairs in order.

The evening before his departure was spent in a final excess of silver-counting and wife-contemplation. Then, with many expressions of trust and regard, he consigned his wealth to the care of Yussef Hassan, his partner and friend, and entrusted his wives into the keeping of Sulima, an ageing crone who ordered the affairs of his harem. To the accompaniment of much hanging of shapely heads and great floods of exquisite tears, he took his departure.

And so we leave him on the long and dangerous road to Baghdad, turning our thoughts to the six dainty little grass-widows left disconsolately in the rear and deprived of their pathetic ration of affection.

For a time their decorum left nothing to be desired; they spent many days laughing and playing under the kindly but watchful eyes of Sulima, who, now old and fat, wished for nothing more than to live with the memories of her youth.

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As she watched them at play, or bathing and scenting their graceful bodies at the pool, she could find no envy in her heart. The sagging cheeks and withered lips, from which old passions had long ago drained all semblance of moisture and colour, were sometimes tightened into a smile in which the observant might have glimpsed the fleeting ghost of her departed beauty and voluptuous youth.

So the days passed, peaceful and monotonous, until a further misfortune befell Ahmed, and in its train brought a little colour into the drabness of the harem. One sultry night, when hot, half-defined longings were causing Ahmed's lovely wives to toss and turn fitfully in their sleep, the peace of the house was disturbed by muffled scufflings and scrapings, which continued without surcease until the dawn. The six wives slept restlessly on, caught in the romantic fantasies of their dreams, each sleep-flushed face confiding a curiously eager little smile to the night.

In the early morning light six soft pairs of hands rubbed the remnants of sleep from six pairs of warm brown eyes, and six flat, bare little stomachs felt the sharp pangs of healthy appetite. There ensued much clapping of hands and tugging of bell-ropes, but no answering patter of feet was heard, no appetizing aroma of cooking food disturbed the incense-laden air of the harem; only silence . . . complete and mystifying.

Helplessly, Ahmed's wives stared at each other, bewilderment sending its tiny furrows across each faultless brow. A thousand conjectures filled their minds, whilst initiative lay dormant under the fetters of lifelong obedience. It was not until Sulima appeared, in the guise of comforting authority, that inertia gave way to action, and, once apprised of the situation, she set off fearfully into the vastness of the house to investigate.

She was away a long time, whilst anxiety and hunger mounted in the seclusion of the harem.

When at last she returned, waddling through the door on slippered feet, the news she bore was grave. Thoughtlessly omitting to leave word of his destination, and with a broad interpretation of the laws of ownership, Hassan had departed during the night, taking with him anything of value on which he could lay his acquisitive fingers: silver, furnishings, wine, and food. As if to make their destitution complete, he had, with singular lack of consideration, dismissed the servants.

So it was that six lovely wives and one old woman were left alone and without apparent means of support. Faced with this unprecedented calamity they spent the remaining hours of the day in sorrowful idleness until they could find refuge from care and hunger in the mercy of sleep.

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By morning those six little stomachs were complaining pitifully under the pinching fingers of hunger. Thus, with necessity spurring on their limited powers of invention, the wives sat down to seek a solution to their difficulties.

It fell to Jasmin, Ahmed's youngest and most recent acquisition, and the fairest flower in a hothouse of exquisite blooms, to voice the answer to their predicament. In fairness to the ingenuous Jasmin, we must consider the circumstances leading to the scandalous proposition she was to make.

Since their marriage a year before, Ahmed had, in his thrifty way, left her to mature like some vintage wine until such time as he should be moved to sample her sweetness. Probably this factor, coupled with half-remembered snatches of gossip from her childhood, helped to suggest the only way she knew in which a woman of beauty could, without benefit of brains or talent, add to her material well-being.

Thus, with wide-eyed innocence and the best intentions in the world did she utter the startling pronouncement that resulted in a shocked silence and five pretty blushes.

" One of us must take a wealthy lover."

After the first impact of this outrageous statement had spent itself and her horrified audience had recovered the use of its vocal cords, poor Jasmin was deluged by a veritable storm of protest, so that, bewildered and at a loss to know how she had offended, she endeavoured a tearful explanation.

" It would be unthinkable," she wailed, " if our Dear Husband were to return to find his house empty and his few remaining possessions dead of starvation."

Faced with this indisputable logic, which offered at the same time a sop to their sensibilities, the well-being of the unfortunate Ahmed suddenly became the subject of great concern.

" Oh, yes! " they moaned in chorus. " Unthinkable! "

In this unselfish and exemplary manner the idea grew, and the more they thought about it the more feasible it became. The proposition was placed before an outraged Sulima, who had little relish for a death by slow starvation. Eventually, after a great display of reluctance, she gave her blessing to the venture.

With the greatest obstacle thus satisfactorily surmounted there remained only the question—who? Soon it was evident that the six wives loved their master with equal fervour, for each loudly and insistently claimed the right to make the sacrifice and to save the others from shame.

Deep in thought, Sulima sat quietly amidst the uproar, and suddenly, when violence seemed imminent, she raised a wrinkled hand and enjoined silence.

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"You must draw lots for this honour," she dictated. "I shall take six pieces of parchment, on five of which I shall make a mark. Each of you will take a piece in turn, and whoever holds that which is unmarked shall be the one to save the fortunes of the household. You will then occupy six different rooms in separate parts of the house and I shall arrange for a suitably wealthy lover to visit the unfortunate one. In this manner none but myself will know her shame."

Shortly, with a great deal of nervous giggling, the lottery was completed. Fair Jasmin steadied her palpitating heart with one soft hand, as the blank parchment before her divulged its fateful message.

Late that night, bathed and scented, she lay awake on her cushions. If, as she reclined there in wide-eyed expectation, she hoped that her lover would be young and handsome, and perhaps thought more of this than of the shame that was to befall, who shall blame her, for is not mankind's greatness inherent in the ability to make the most of adversities and to rise above them?

At last there was a movement at the door and a tall man, heavily cloaked, was ushered into the room by Sulima, her eyes gleaming wickedly with secret thoughts. She had overcome her scruples entirely, and now entered whole-heartedly into the spirit of the conspiracy.

If Jasmin, blushing from head to toe, greeted her lover ardently during the secret moments that followed, or accepted his caresses with more enjoyment than was perhaps seemly, then we must, in charity, accept this as a sign of her fairness; that she was loath to disappoint him when he knew not the nature of her sacrifice.

At the first light of dawn she awoke to find herself alone, and lay there awhile in contemplation of the events of the night. Then, rising and stretching luxuriously, she sought out Sulima and furtively deposited with her fifty pieces of silver.

Soon food was procured and the cheerful smell of cooking seeped in from the kitchen. Each wife happily assuaged her hunger, and soon, when they could eat no more, a singular air of contentment reigned. It is to their credit that not once was reference made to the events of the night, so that Jasmin was able to hide, and eventually forget, a natural flood of embarrassment that at first threatened to overwhelm her and to betray her secret. After a morning of cheerful chatter and singing they lay down to sleep through the heat of the afternoon. Peace reigned, disturbed only occasionally by little sighs of contentment as the wives dreamed happily.

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Such was the pattern of their days for many months to come. In time they prospered so much that they were able to replace many of the furnishings that had disappeared at the departure of the light-fingered Hassan, and little Jasmin was content that her industry and regular contributions to the communal purse would ensure her master's return to a happy household.

Meanwhile, unaware of the devotion safeguarding his interests at home, Ahmed had arrived in Baghdad after many weary weeks on the road. His business was soon settled and, with nothing to detain him further, Ahmed set about looking for a caravan to join on the road to Damascus. When none was immediately available he found time hanging heavily on his hands. Without the pleasures of silver- and wife-contemplation to sustain him, he fell into bad company and the pursuit of vice, finding both to be expensive but very agreeable.

Within a few short months he discovered that there is even greater pleasure to be obtained from spending money than from hoarding it, and it occurred to him gradually that the girls of Baghdad with whom he whiled away his lonely hours could not compare for beauty and charm with his own six wives.

Thus it was that a greatly changed Ahmed eventually joined a homeward-bound caravan and was at last greeted with effusive joy on his arrival in Damascus. Receiving with surprising equanimity the news of Hassan's treachery, he set out with renewed vigour to restore his fortune. None sought to enlighten him as to the source of the silver which had sustained his household during his absence, and it never occurred to him to question it; which perhaps shows that a constant and successful search for wealth often dulls the wits in other respects.

As time passed, Ahmed again prospered exceedingly, and with all the convert's zest indulged himself in his new-found pleasures. Never again had his wives cause for complaint, so that they waxed contented and eventually fat. If sometimes he felt a vague disquiet at innocent Jasmin's proficiency in matters of the heart, he never showed it; perhaps it seemed natural in the light of his new experience, or in comparison with the attraction of his other wives, who had acquired an enhanced charm unnoticed in his wife-contemplation days.

So the air of contentment gradually prevailed; a contented Ahmed Rashid and six contented wives. Even Sulima was contented in her own way. As she advanced in years she had her memories to sustain her, and most of all she liked to remember the happy months of Ahmed's visit to Baghdad.

Sometimes, when recollection was vague in her mind, she

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would retire to her room and, with her dimming eyes glinting wickedly, would take from an old oak chest her mementoes of that visit: ten thousand pieces of silver and six pieces of parchment—each starkly uncompromising in its virgin blankness.

★ ★ ★

ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD

PRIZE-WINNERS OF CROSSWORD NO. 10

We are pleased to announce the three winners of Argosy's tenth Prize Crossword Competition:—

Miss Hermione Grainger, Royal Parade, Chislehurst, Kent.

Roy A. Hare, Esq., Naval Camp, Pitreavie, Rosyth, Scotland.

Maurice Taylor, Esq., Marlborough Road, Stretford, Lancs.

These readers, who sent in the first correct solutions to be checked on the closing date, each receive a one-guinea book token.

SOLUTION

Across. 1, *Powder-puff.* 6, *Ogee.* 10, *Skate.* 11, *Lingering.* 12, *Evening.* 13, *Abandon.* 14, *Poison.* 15, *Eclipse.* 18, *Overact.* 21, *Tyrant.* 23, *Lighter.* 25, *Command.* 27, *Corporeal.* 28, *Aspen.* 29, *Pods.* 30, *Coldstream.*

Down. 1, *Paste.* 2, *Whalebone.* 3, *Enemies.* 4, *Polygon.* 5, *Fanfare.* 7, *Grind.* 8, *Engineer.* 9, *Retail.* 16, *Pineapple.* 17, *Foolscap.* 19, *Action.* 20, *Torpedo.* 21, *Tickled.* 22, *Rampart.* 24, *Gored.* 26, *Denim.*

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 13

Argosy's thirteenth Prize Crossword Competition appears on page 144. There will be one-guinea book tokens for the first three correct solutions checked on the closing date. Entries should be completed *in ink*, and posted to:

ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD (No. 13),
3 Pilgrim Street, London, E.C.4 (Comp.),

to arrive by Wednesday, June 9th, the closing date.

We regret that entry must be limited to readers living in Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and Eire. There is no entry fee and the Editor's decision is final.

Names of the prize-winners in this competition and the solution will appear in the issue of Argosy on sale August 10th.

RAY BRADBURY—CLEVE CARTMILL—
RICHARD STERN—ARTHUR GORDON
In next month's ARGOSY

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Bill Conway, a young R.A.S.C. Major, in charge of wartime convoys from Ahwaz, in the Persian desert, to Russia, puts down riots, incurring the hatred of the terrorist Friends of Iran, who threaten him, and order him to get out of Persia.

In Teheran, he volunteers for a secret mission under Lt.-Col. "Sandy" Mackenzie, Chief of Intelligence. Conway's fiancée, Jean, has thrown him over, and he now meets Tania, Sandy's lovely, red-haired, Polish secretary, who decodes a document taken by him from a Russian corpse in a wrecked truck. It refers obscurely to a "meeting," and to "three tents in Cairo: two fly on: Elias is a Chinaman."

As Agent 166, Conway is sent with an escort to bring out four tons of gold from Shiraz. En route in Isfahan, Aristide Manassian, brocade dealer and loyal agent, is murdered by the Friends. In Shiraz, Conway comes upon a "meeting" of the Friends in the Bagh-i-Aram, the Garden of Heart's Content. Held prisoner, he overhears that "gaz" is needed in large quantities. He escapes, fights off an attack on his convoy at Persepolis and kills a young terrorist whose Luger and map he takes. He brings the gold safely to Isfahan, where blind Ali points to the skull behind the Persian lion on a silver toman, and hints that Manassian's dying message concerned the railway.

"The Skull" is the suspected leader of the Friends of Iran. On Sandy's orders, Conway, with his faithful Quashgai servant, Bezard, pays a secret visit to the hill tribes in search of The Skull.

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In the Quashgai camp, they meet two terrorists led by a tall, military figure, nicknamed "The Sword." Conway discovers that the young man he killed at Persepolis was The Sword's son.

The Skull appears in the camp, is accused by Bezard of wife-stealing; he fails to meet Conway's challenge and steals away, thus discrediting the Friends of Iran among the tribes.

Back in Teheran, Tania greets Conway. As the Fourth (and last) Part of the story opens, Sandy briefs him for a strategic mission.

SANDY stopped to relight his pipe and then, between puffs of smoke, he quoted: "*Three tents in Cairo; two fly on; Elias is a Chinaman* . . . The Prime Minister sent to President Roosevelt some time ago a suggestion for a meeting . . ."

I was sitting straight up in my chair now.

"Three tents in Cairo," I said, "Churchill, Roosevelt and—"

"*Elias is a Chinaman*," he said.

"Chiang Kai-shek?"

"Of course: then *Two fly on*."

"Roosevelt and Churchill? Here?"

"To meet Uncle Joe, in Teheran; and I, with you under me, have got a big security problem on my plate, God help us! The small comfort we have is that the Russians knew about the part that was no concern of theirs over a month ago, someone else tried to steal that knowledge and has started to get extremely active."

"When is this to be?" I asked.

"I don't know yet, but probably middle November."

My mind raced round the fragments in our possession.

"How are they leaving?" I said.

"I hope by the same way as they arrive—in a plane. But I don't like that circle on the map or Manassian's talk of the railway. Somebody seems to know what they are going to do before they decide themselves."

"As security officer, can't you say that the railway is out—too dangerous?"

"My dear Bill," he said irritably, "you should know by now that the man on the spot never knows a bloody thing that anyone a thousand miles away will listen to. No, you go back to Ahwaz—today, for I want you in one piece when the time comes. And while you are there, just think, think, think, think."

Tania came down with me to the station; I had sent Bezard on ahead with the truck and had decided to go in comfort by train. It was nearly time to leave when I leaned out of the carriage window, looking down at her, and caught hold of both her hands. I wanted to kiss her badly, but it all seemed to be so public.

She looked back at me, a tendril of red hair hanging free from the loose head-scarf that she wore; her blue eyes were fixed on mine.

"Tell me, Bill, did you want very much to sleep with me these last few nights?" The question was put quietly and quite simply.

"Yes, no—you know that I did—but I thought that—"

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" Is it just that I am a woman—any woman—and that there is a war on, or is it because I am me? "

I tried to give her an honest answer.

" I wish I could tell you for certain, sweet, but I don't really know, myself; I know I hope it is because you are you."

" I have hated all men "—she was looking at my hands again—" but I can't hate you, Bill, however much I try. I want to love you, but I'm just so afraid of what would happen to me if anything went wrong with us."

I said softly: " I wouldn't let you down."

She loosed my hands and nodded. " I'm so nearly sure of that—that next time I'll do whatever you want. Write soon and often. I'll be waiting, darling." With a quick movement, she reached up and touched my mouth. Then she was gone; her shining hair showed for a moment through the crowd; and, to the crescendo of noise that always accompanies the departure of an eastern train, the Trans-Iranian Express jerked into motion.

So I went back to the Company. There, everything went on in the same deadly routine. Each morning the burning fingers of the sun stretched out and bored into the plain from above the shelter of the eastern mountains—every day a little earlier and a little hotter. By mid-morning, the force of it seemed to press you into the ground and work became impossible.

The relief of the evening cool—it was one of comparison, for the temperature never dropped below 100 all night—was the signal for the return of activity. But it gave us no peace, as other things as well as humans then came to life. Soldier ants would advance in purposeful columns across floors, tables, and even half-filled dinner plates, nipping like red-hot needles if they were brushed aside; poisonous tarantula spiders scurried up and down the walls and scorpions lurked in blankets and boots.

Even in bed there was no peace for a Commanding Officer. The dark shape that moved across the faint light between the huts—was it a pyedog, rabid and on the scavenge, or a Persian, crawling under a sheepskin, who had managed to get through the triple lines of barbed wire to loot what he could from the stores?

The poverty in the town was awful. Ahwaz is a filthy, stinking place. Not a building to touch any in Shiraz or Isfahan, and but one paved and artificially-lit street. The rest is a stew of mud hovels, riddled by a warren of narrow alleys. Wandering in no set pattern, they are fetid with the stench of refuse and ordure.

I strolled out of the camp and crossed the strip of desert towards the town. I had decided to go for a walk there. After all that had happened, with all the warnings I had had, it was an incredibly stupid thing to do. Though I held one of the only three passes to enter the native quarters, I had never done this before alone.

The twilight was deepening fast and the evening cool was setting in. Here and there, the men got up from where they were squatting on their doorsteps as I stopped to have short conversations.

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I admired the male children—females were ignored, more often than not they were put out in the desert to die at birth—and bowed into the gloom at the back of the hut, where one or two pale slits showed the eyes of the veiled wives who remained hidden, huddled in their *chaddors*. The cooking-fires were burning and sometimes there came soft singing, or little sad tunes played on pipes.

Further on I came to a tea-house and inside it the opium-smokers were busy. They sat or sprawled, each face lit by the glowing charcoal of the brazier beside them. I watched the grey pellets of the drug put into their cherry-wood pipes; then, as they applied a glowing ember from the fire with tongs, the contents of the pipe-bowl would boil and turn to tar. They lay back on cushions, puffing in content; others tossed and groaned in nightmare dreams.

When I turned away it was quite dark. It was impossible to pick out individual alleys; one could only twist and turn down them, making in the general direction of the blue glow of the arc-lights of the main street that was reflected in the sky. There were very few people about now and I had gone only a little way before I realized that I was being followed.

At first it was just the soft shuffle of bare feet on the beaten earth some way behind me, but always keeping their distance; I twisted and turned to shake them off, but still they were there. They came a little closer and I could distinguish that there were two pairs, one heavier in tread than the other. I quickened my pace and they came faster; then at the next corner I stopped, and their noise ceased as suddenly. Lighting a cigarette, I looked back over my shoulder—there was nothing there but the dim outline of the walls of the alley.

The only thing to do was to get to the lighted main street at once. Alone, with only a short stick, my shoulders felt very cold and bare. I walked faster and the footsteps quickened their pace and started to close in. Then, in panic, I started to run. I dashed round a corner and there ahead was a narrow crack that showed a strip of concrete pavement reflecting the flickering bluish light. They were thudding just behind me and I could hear the tearing of breath.

Then it happened; I had just given a desperate shout, when a terrific blow landed in the small of my back. It spun me against the wall, then forward onto my face; I tried to get to my feet, but my legs refused to work. I levered myself up on my elbows and an agonizing pain shot through my back; I remember thinking: So it does hurt after all. Then I collapsed, my head lying sideways on my arms, waiting for them to come again and finish me off.

Nothing happened; at the end of the alley I saw the silhouette of a Persian policeman, his rifle at the ready, peering down towards me. I tried to shout, "Robbers," but my voice would not come and my mouth seemed full of warm salt soup. I coughed and spat and it came out black and sticky. The policeman seemed afraid to come nearer, so I had to try to get to him; as I dragged myself along, the alley lengthened and shortened in waves; I was very tired and really it did not seem worth the effort. Then he was

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bending over me; I could see the questioning eyes under the tall spiked helmet. The arc-light behind him swelled bigger and bigger, till everything was a vast blue ball; suddenly it all faded to a tiny point. As I went down into the darkness, a small voice deep inside me said: *All you want is Tania, now and always.* And I knew this was the last truth.

I was in a white box.

It bumped and swayed with a faint humming noise; then, Bezard Ali was sitting at my side, chin on hand, staring at me, while a long red tube stretched from a bandage on his arm. Other people I did not know, white and rustling; Sandy once, sucking his pipe and saying: "You bloody fool."

But most of the times between the falls of the black curtain, it was Tania. She seemed always to be there when I needed her, giving me a cool drink, bathing my face, or just stroking my hair.

Then it was like waking up after a long deep sleep; I opened my eyes and looked round the high stone room. Double doors opened on a wide verandah; I was in a narrow bed, on my side, wedged with pillows; I tried to turn, but it hurt like hell. Then a stranger, a Q.A. nurse, came in and bent over me.

I said: "What's the time and what's the matter with my back?"

"Don't talk, Major. Questions later."

She went away, and I lay there, wondering what the hell I was doing in hospital.

Then Tania was looking at me; I did not seem to be a bit surprised to see her or the strangeness of her nurse's uniform. She was very pale, with dark shadows under her eyes; I decided that I didn't like the cap that hid her lovely hair.

"Hullo," I said. "You do look a sight—what's the time? What day is it? And what's the matter with my back?"

"You keep quiet—it's nine in the morning on Thursday and someone stuck a knife into you."

I started to remember. "Then I've been here since Sunday?"

"Sunday week, Bill. You've been very ill—we all thought you were going to die."

"What are you doing in that rig-out?"

"I had to look right. Sandy rushed me down here at once; he was afraid you might talk, without knowing it, to outside people."

"How did Sandy know?" The Company did not know any of my dealings with him in Teheran; my absence had just been a special convoy job.

"You can thank Bezard Ali for that. He guessed the importance of your visits to us, but he didn't like to tell anyone in the unit. So he pinched your truck and drove straight to the office all through the night. He was on a charge of theft and absence without leave when he got back here, till Sandy explained to your second in command."

I thought for a moment. "Did I talk—and what do you know about nursing?"

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"Enough to look after you during the day; it was just as well I was here, for you said plenty."

"What about the nights—you can't have done it all yourself?"

"I did to start with until Sister Hanson—the one you just saw—took over. She is a good sort and has been sworn to secrecy."

"But—"

"That's quite enough for the moment—stop talking and go to sleep." She tucked the bed-clothes round me, then bent over, and kissed me gently on the mouth.

Everything was coming back to me—most clearly of all, that last sure thought before I had gone into the shadow.

"One last question," I said drowsily. "Will you marry me, darling?"

The answer was so low I could hardly catch it.

"If you want me the way I want you—with all my heart."

It was very pleasant, getting better. Tania was allowed to stay for a week more, and she spent all her time by my bed, reading to me or just talking. There was so much we had to say to each other, so much to discuss. I told her all the past—everything about myself that I could remember; but I did not ask for hers—if she did not wish to speak of it, it was something she could keep for her own, always.

Then there was our marriage—I demanded it at once, I was so sure of what I wanted. We were talking of it for about the fiftieth time on the day before Sandy came down to take her back to Teheran.

Tania took my hands in hers: "Aren't we rushing it, Bill? Are you sure that you don't want to wait a little while?"

"Quite, quite sure."

"There isn't any—how do you say?—rebound from Jean?"

"None—I promise you."

With a finger, she traced a scar on the back of my hand. "I want to be so certain, darling, I couldn't bear anything to go wrong with us; I've thought about it so much since you have been lying here."

"So have I, and I just know it is right, and I want to be happy with you always."

"Me, too." It was the final claim to share everything.

She got up. "But things are so uncertain—you may be sent back to England when you are fit enough to travel. I would not be able to come with you."

"If you want to wait for the end of the war, we shall probably be too old to bother. All I know is that I believe in this more than I have ever believed in anything before—and I want to do it now."

She stared out of the window and suddenly shivered.

"Reason tells me that we should wait, but something else, deep down inside me says, 'Snatch it now, while there is still time.'"

"All right then, I'll settle for engagement now and marriage in a month—that's my last word!"

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She came over and kissed me: "Impatient one! Let's ask Sandy what he thinks in the morning."

I took Bezard's silver ring off my hand and slipped it on her finger, where it wobbled precariously.

"Till I can do something properly in Teheran," I said. "Please don't lose it."

"I promise you will have it back," she said.

We had a party that night to celebrate the announcement. I went in a wheel chair to the Sisters' Mess where it was held and we managed to get quite a good crowd at the short notice. All my officers were there, together with the Americans and some of the "Oily Boys:" even the Consul condescended to appear. I did not stay too long as I still tired very easily; though the wound in my back was healing well, I had not really recovered from the loss of blood. The knife, which had been aimed at my heart, had missed it and gone in lower down, puncturing the bottom of my left lung and, luckily, missing anything else vital.

After I had been put back to bed I lay smoking, with the light out, looking out into the night, listening to the noise of the party dying down and waiting for Tania to come and say good night.

Soon she was in the doorway, wrapped in a dark cloak, her hair shining in the moonlight. I held out my arms and she came to me.

"I'm not going to leave you," she whispered. "Something tells me I must be with you now. Hanson's on duty, and I've squared her as long as I don't damage your back, she's sweet . . . Oh, darling . . . My darling Bill . . ."

The cloak dropped in a black heap to the floor and I could see the faint gleam of her pale body; then she was close beside me. Holding her tight, my head on her shoulder and brushed by that heavy fragrant hair, I drifted between sleep and love until she left me at dawn.

She came back to say good-bye before Sandy arrived. Remembering now, I don't think she looked any different as she turned from the last blown kiss at the door. Perhaps she did know, but the mark of it was not yet on her face.

Sandy was delighted at the news, pacing up and down as he talked, and hurting my back as he wrung my hand.

"Congratulations, Bill. I'm awfully glad—she's a grand girl—I hoped it would happen. Though I did not know it, I've brought you a nice engagement present."

He put a copy of *Persia and Iraq Force General Orders* on my bed. It was opened at the page of *Honours, Awards, Postings.*

Four paragraphs were marked; the first three told me that I had been promoted Temporary Lieutenant-Colonel, posted from the Company to G.H.Q., Teheran, for "special duties," and finally, for good measure, been awarded the O.B.E.—*For services on aid to Russia.*

The last entry announced that Bezard Ali, driver 1st class, attached 762 Company R.A.S.C., had been given the M.B.E. for the same reason.

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"Again, congratulations," he said. "I managed to get the promotion back-dated long enough so that even if they ship you home you will only drop back to your present rank. As for the posting, I need you badly if you are passed fit to stay, so badly that the General says you are to come back as soon as the doctors agree. But this engagement makes a difference—do you want to stay out here at all? This next job will be very, very tricky."

I told him I wanted to stay, and of the difficulties we had foreseen if I was shipped home.

"I think we can get round that," he said. "If you are allowed to stay and Tania agrees—for she comes into it now—I'll keep you in Teheran—you can get a flat and Tania can carry on with her job if she wants to. Otherwise, I've got a bit of a pull at G.H.Q., Beirut; there are some nice jobs going there, and you would both be left in peace till the end of the war. I can think of worse places to settle permanently."

We left it at that and I thanked him for all his kindness—particularly in remembering Bezard—for I knew he would be as pleased as Punch.

Sandy made his parting shot from the door as he left.

"If I were you, I should think of applying for a Persian passport," he said.

"What on earth for?"

"Well, if you and Bezard go on swopping blood as fast as this, you will soon be a full-blooded Persian. Did they tell you he put three pints into you when you were brought in here?"

He waved his cap in farewell.

It was only then that I realized that it had changed. Still the taxi-driver's model of cap, the regimental badge had gone—now behind the lion and crown was a band of red flannel. Sandy was a full Colonel—at last someone had realized that he was a very important person.

The next days passed, quiet and fast. Tania had gone, but she was still with me all the time. Long letters came from her, one enclosing some medal ribbon for Bezard and me. There was plenty of time for me to read, think, and plan.

We decided to get married in the hospital chapel in Ahwaz; Tania had but few friends in Teheran, and so most of the guests would be on the spot—also, I could throw a feast for the Persians, as my last good-bye. Sandy had promised to come down and give Tania away. A few days before the date we had fixed I was to go up to Teheran and bring her back.

I had a lot of visitors at the hospital; British, American, Persian. Bezard came many times; bringing baskets of marigolds, he would sit shyly on the verandah, his two small sons squatting beside him, staring at me in silence, with eyes like boot-buttons. I went back to the Company for the last week to hand over to Jim Hope, who, it was nice to know, had got the command in my stead.

There was a fine ceremony with all the Persians on parade, when

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Bezard was handed his medal ribbon. After this, I was embarrassed to be given a large basket of roses by the senior Persian. At his whispered prompting, I groped through the prickles to find at the bottom a beautiful Isfahan silver cigarette-case, a present from them all to me. Inside was an inscription of goodwill in Persian and English—it was good to have proof of my belief that they were more pleased with the pip above my crown than with Bezard's decoration.

This week saw, too, the final exit of Mr. Ibrahim Shakir, the interpreter. After the attack on me, he decided that Ahwaz had become too dangerous for his treasured person. We got him aboard the Teheran train with his luggage—fourteen brown-paper parcels tied up with odds and ends of string, an empty parrot-cage, a large green umbrella, and nine mousetraps threaded in line on a rope.

With a final farewell party in the mess, Tania and Teheran were only two days away; for once everything was going right.

It was on that last morning that I got Sandy's telegram.

Await arrival trying to get down tonight was all it said.

All day I wondered what on earth could have happened, and when he arrived, tired, drawn, and very silent, I took him over for a drink in the mess. He knocked two back fast and then said, abruptly: "Where can we go for a quiet talk?"

There are no beauty spots in Ahwaz, but I took him down in the car to where the river wound its way, slow and oily, through the town. The sun was sinking, and the women were fetching water or washing clothes on the banks, careful not to go in more than ankle-deep for fear of being taken by sharks. The huddle of the town crouched on each side, and to the west the spider of the cantilever bridge showed black against the orange sky.

Sandy passed me a cigarette. "It's Tania," he said.

An icy finger felt for my heart. "What's the matter—?" My voice did not sound like my own.

"She's dead, Bill."

I remember just watching one of the women washing her clothes; she wrung out the garment, twisting it into a tight sausage, and then steadily beat it on the rock beside her . . . slap . . . slap . . . slap, then unfolding, wringing, and beating again. I wondered if she thought of anything as she went on like this, hour after hour. I felt nothing—I was like a stone.

"How did it happen?" My voice seemed to come from a long way off.

He gripped the steering-wheel, bending forward with his head lowered; his voice ran on in a level, unbroken monotone; it was like a lesson he had learnt by heart.

"I must tell you all of this, Bill—just as it happened. Did you know that ever since you came back from the tribe, both of you had an escort in Teheran, all the time? I don't suppose you saw them ever, for they were very good men; but I knew then the sort of

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thing we were up against and I wanted to be very, very careful. Then you had your accident and I saw that she was never left alone —until the evening it happened, and then only because I was with her. Bill, I was close beside her when it was done." There was agony in his voice.

"Go on," I said.

"She had the afternoon off. I asked the escort afterwards and he said that she had been up to Shemiran, sitting all the time under a big oak at the top pool."

"I know it."

"When she came back, she phoned me. 'Sandy, I've had such a lovely day,' she said. 'I've been up by our tree all the afternoon —just thinking. Take me out to dinner tonight. I'm so happy, so ready, but I don't want to be alone.' We went out, Bill, and then she wanted to go to the cinema; we went to the Cosmo and it was a bloody awful film. At the end we stood up for the anthem —you know, orders."

It was the same cinema. I could see it all so clearly: the half-light while the record blared away; the troops' ammunition boots crashing on the floor at the pauses; the suppressed giggles and the fetid atmosphere of cigars, sweat, and cheap perfume. It would have been just the same.

He went on without a break. "While the anthem was playing, from along our row from my side, a man pushed past to get out; he had his hat on and I thought he was a drunk—I remember wondering what the police would do if they saw him. As he passed me, he trod on my toes and then lurched and half fell against Tania. It was so quick that I couldn't do a thing. She gave one little cough and fell forward onto the seats in front; by the time I had picked her up he had vanished."

There was a pause. "I didn't see his face," he said, "but he was very tall and thin."

He reached out and put a hand on my knees. "I swear to you, Bill, and the doctor will swear it too: it was instantaneous. She could not have known a thing—it had gone straight through her heart."

"What had?"

There was an even longer pause.

"An ice-pick," he said.

Half of me was not there listening; it was down with the woman by the rock: "Are you happy?" I wondered, "or does your husband beat you—are you the first wife, or the second, the drudge? Have you been blessed with a man-child or have you had to put a daughter out into the desert to die?" There was no answer save the slap . . . slap of her washing against the stone.

Then Sandy's voice went on: "We buried her this morning in the Polish cemetery," he said. "I hope you will forgive me for not getting hold of you, but I thought it was best that way.

"I have seen the Polish authorities and explained everything to them—you can have anything in the flat that you want, but I

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thought you would like these now, though." He put two envelopes in my hand; then he got out of the car and walked away.

I opened the seals; from one, Bezard's ring dropped, warm and heavy, into my hand. In the other was a coil of that lovely red hair, still smelling faintly of her perfume. This was all that was left then, but I could not get the relief of tears. I sat there, running the hair through my hands, twisting it, thinking: "This hair—it might have come off any red-head who used the same perfume and I would not know the difference—I'm trying to think of her voice, but I can't really remember it. I couldn't imitate it now, it's just any woman's soft voice, with a little accent. It's the smallest things that stick; the way she smoothed her skirt when she sat down; the funny unconscious face she made when she put on a hat; they are the things that you do not want to see other women do—they will always give you a stab. So sleep well, my darling, and if you dream, dream the ones that I will remember."

I got out of the car and went to join Sandy where he sat on a rock.

"Thank you, Sandy, I'm O.K. now."

He nodded. "I'm not one for words," he said, "but I think you know how I feel—I shall always blame myself for this—and you know I loved her, too . . ."

When we were back in the car, he said: "What do you want to do now?"

"Come back with you and get stuck into something right away."

He drew on his pipe. "Yes, I think that it would be the best thing for you—that is, if you are fit enough. Teheran is out in the circumstances, but I want you badly on *Eureka*. It's either that or go home." I was too numb to ask what *Eureka* meant.

"I would rather stay if you will keep me—I've nothing at home and a big score to settle here—you know, as well as I, who did it!"

The next morning, after nearly two years, I left Ahwaz for the last time without any good-byes. It was November 1st, 1943.

I drove up alone with Sandy, for Bezard was following behind with my baggage in a truck. All through the first day and our halt at the town of Dizful I was left alone with my thoughts. It was only on the second morning, on one of the high sweeps of a pass, that Sandy pulled off the road and switched off the engine.

"This is as good a place to talk as any," he said.

I looked down over the rolling grey-green and brown country, chequered with the shadows of hurrying clouds. Sandy rummaged in a case in the back; when he turned round he was holding something wrapped in a white cloth. While he was undoing it, he said: "I've got to show you this, Bill. I'm not a sadist—but you have got to know the sort of people we are up against. Someone spent a long time preparing this."

The wrapping fell away and something gleamed in the sunlight; it was an ice-pick. Just an ordinary one, with a varnished handle; at least it was clean, without stains. I don't think I could have stood that.

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I took it from him and turned it over; the whole shaft had been ground down to a fine taper, and the point was like a needle; it must have taken hours to do. "This was the one?" I asked.

"Yes."

I held it with the point resting in the centre of my palm. I could see so clearly just where it had gone in before—into the creamy white skin just below—No! I pushed hard and it was so sharp that I did not feel a thing until the blood spurted and Sandy shouted, "Stop it!" knocking it from my hand.

"Sorry," I said as I sucked at the place. "It won't happen again; but I'm glad you showed me, and I won't forget."

"Then let's talk business," he said.

"*Cairo Three* is the code name of the first part of this party, which, thank God, doesn't concern us. *Eureka* is the trip here, and is going to keep us both awake for the next month, for despite anything we can say, they are going back to Basra by train."

"Manassian's message and the map," I said.

"Yes, it is obvious that even without that knowledge, the railway is the place where anyone would try and play tricks. Nature is so helpful! We can't all be everywhere at once, so I have chopped the country into three zones. I have got to be in Teheran, anyway, so I take that and the rail as far as Durud; you get Durud to Andimesk, and Miller from there to the Gulf."

"I get the tricky part," I said.

"Yes, I'm afraid so, but you know it and I've got to lean on someone, Bill. Teheran is quite out for you now and it will save you to get stuck into something difficult."

And that was the last time he ever referred, either directly or otherwise, to Tania.

"Where do you want me to live?"

"Well, the Yanks are working this with us, of course, but the majority of guard troops will be British. Uncle Joe is not our worry, as he is being looked after by his own. I am attaching you to the Americans operating the railway at Durud. You are there on a 'survey;' only their C.O. has an inkling of what is really up, but you will get all the help you want from them."

"How many men shall I get to guard my stretch?"

"As many as possible for the maximum of twenty-four hours, but I doubt if it will be more than two thousand, all ranks; the majority will be Indian State troops, too."

This was not so good: the average standard of these regiments was a good bit below normal Indian level.

Looking out over the pass, I did not really see the wonderful view, but a broken line on a map and the shape of the country as one saw it, riding up the rails. It was about a hundred miles as the crow flies, but the railway, with its twists and turns, must cover nearly twice that distance. This meant at the most that I would have about ten men a mile to guard the track and bridges; it could hardly have done on a normal stretch of line, but here I was confronted by one of the most fantastic engineering feats in the world.

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Andimesk is at sea level, on the fringe of the foot-hills. Durud is on the edge of the central plateau, at a height of six thousand feet. Between them, barring the way, is the central Zagros range, most peaks rising to thirteen thousand feet. The only gap in this barrier is the gorge of the River Diz, which falls between high cliffs, by waterfall and rapid from pool to pool, to find its way into the Karun and then the sea.

Down this cleft the railway creeps, clinging to a narrow ledge, perched high above the green, raging torrent below. Often, in the course of a mile, it will cross and recross the river three or four times on slender unrailed bridges. Sometimes, when travelling up the line, you could look out of the train and see nothing but a thin streak of blue sky between the cliffs, and ahead, another towering wall that seemed to block the way completely. You thought: "It's impossible—they just can't have got a railway through there." But the British engineers that made it had one more trick to pull out of the bag. By boring long spiral tunnels through the living rock, they had made the line double back on itself and come out of the same cliff at a higher level but travelling in the opposite direction.

In one place you could stand and look down on three levels of track, one above the other, and the head and tail of a long train would seem to be going in different directions at the same time.

This was the stretch I had to look after; as I thought about it, I realized that there must be hundreds of bridges and tunnels that had to be guarded, all of them vulnerable. I said to Sandy: "Two thousand men can't begin to look after this properly."

He nodded. "I know. All we can do is to make out a minimum plan and press for as many troops as possible. You can start your 'survey' as soon as you like—there is a turning that goes through to Durud about ten miles up the road. You had better take the truck and use that; the Yanks are putting a rail-car at your disposal for touring up and down, or if you want to see me you can come up to Teheran by normal train—I want Bezard Ali to stay up here with me," he added.

"I don't think he will care for that very much," I said. "He doesn't feel at home in Teheran."

"I don't care if he feels at home or not—do you realize that you and he are the only two people we know who have seen The Skull and heard his voice? The gentleman will be right bang in the middle of any party that may be brewing and we must split you up for that reason. If you want someone to help you blow your nose, the Yanks can detail him. Master Bezard can wander round Teheran on the look-out and do what he is told, for once."

There was the usual argument with Bezard. At length, sulky and muttering darkly, he climbed in beside Sandy. I waited till their dust-trail had died down, then slowly coasted down the far side of the pass to the turning south for Durud. I was thinking that the marked circle on the map was slap in the middle of my new territory.

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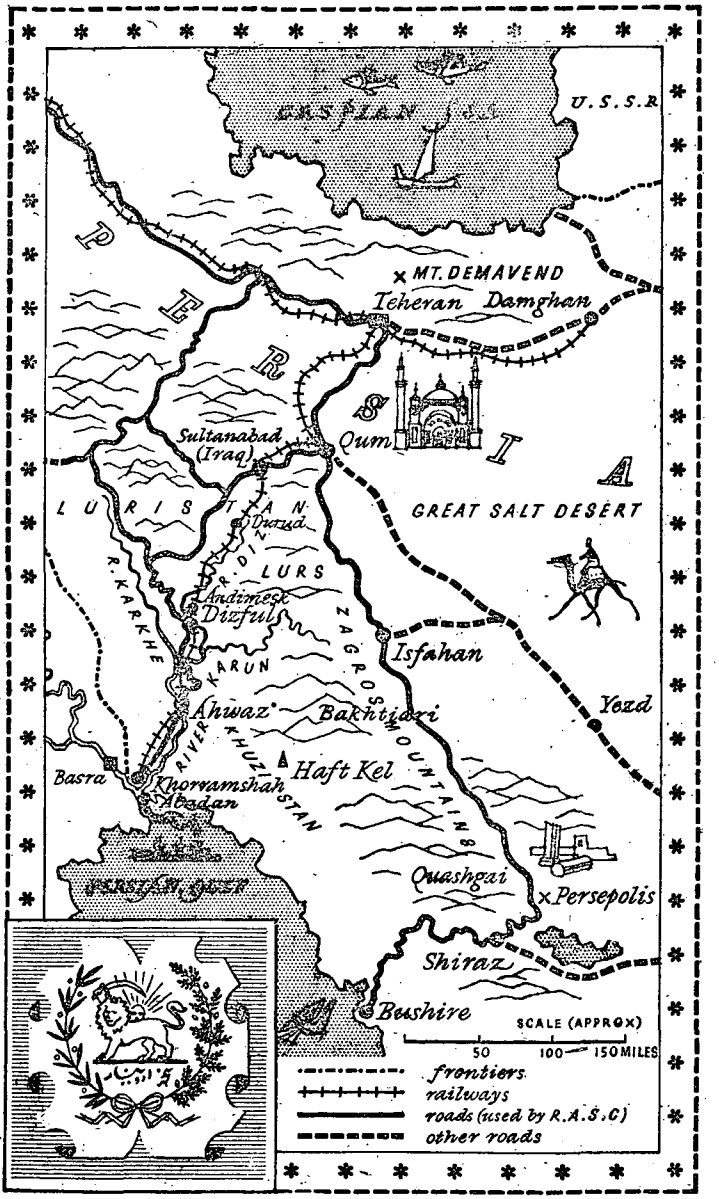

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THE headquarters of the Railway Operating Group was just beside Durud Station. The pleasant little village was about a mile off, at the head of the gorge. The river wound its way across the rolling plateau, peaceful between green fields and banks of rushes, before plunging on its next troubled hundred miles.

The American camp was large, for the railway station was an important one; here were stationed the extra engines, used on the down trains for more braking-power, and the double-headers of the up trains were detached when there was no further need for their help.

The quarters were well equipped and comfortable, and the food far better than we had in our army. I think the thing that struck me most was the kindness and friendliness of the officers with whom I messed.

I threw myself into the work with but a single thought: to fill my waking hours so that I could not have a moment to think of anything else but the job; to get so tired at the end of the day that I fell asleep at once and did not have a chance to dream.

My driver on the petrol car was an engaging American Top-Sergeant from the South, by name Henry Jones; for ever chewing gum, he was a man of few words, each one seeming to be wrung from the very depths of his soul with great effort. He viewed the country and the inhabitants with great contempt—the former he called I-ran, a long pause between the two syllables, the latter were always referred to collectively as " gooks."

The petrol rail-car itself was ingenious; an ordinary four-seater open truck, with flanged rail wheels fitted beside the tyres; it would travel on either road or rail and on the latter, with steering locked, would do nearly fifty miles an hour. I saw very little of the local tribesmen; they were Lurs—a dirty, sullen lot.

I began to wonder if Sandy had been right about other people having wind of this meeting.

In a fortnight I had got out some sort of plan; it was not grand, but it was flexible, and when I showed it to Sandy he agreed that it was all that could be done in the circumstances. Four subordinate commanders were each given a stretch of about twenty-five miles of line to control; the troops were to be concentrated at Sultanabad —nearer Teheran than my zone—and could be moved down in two trains six hours before *the* TRAIN was due. The individual detachments could then be dropped off one by one on the way down to Andimesk. Afterwards, they could be collected in the same manner, in reverse. We calculated that the delay to normal traffic would not amount to more than six hours at the most. The men were not to be told of their mission until the very last moment.

The days of November moved on quickly.

One evening the telephone orderly came out and beckoned to me.

" You are wanted on the phone, Colonel, it's urgent."

I closed the office door and picked up the receiver.

Sandy's voice, faint on the humming wire, sounded like a disembodied spirit.

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"Bill?"

"Yes."

"Can you get up here at once. It's important!"

I stopped for a moment outside the white door in G.H.Q. bearing nothing but the number 43 and the card, still crooked, that said, *Knock and enter*. I thought: It's quite simple, just march in, turn to your right at Sergeant Holman, say good morning nicely and then keep your eyes fixed on Sandy's door till you are inside. Just forget that the other desk, the one on the left that is so empty, was ever there . . .

Sandy looked awful. He gestured towards a chair and started straight in just as if he were reciting a lesson.

"*Eureka* is tomorrow night, Bill, some time between six and nine from Teheran—which will be midnight to three in your section. The train will have eight coaches—the last two before the guard's van will be the important ones. There will be a pilot train two miles in front of it, flashing three greens as recognition. Three greens answer all clear, white slow, red danger. There will be an after-guard train two miles behind. All other traffic on the line will be halted for two hours either side of dead-line; there are enough sidings at the stations to cope with the up traffic. You will get no further warning, except cancellation, so get to work."

He could have sent me all this by cipher.

"What have you got?" I asked, patiently.

He waved his hand to where an ornate box was lying on his desk. "Help yourself to a bit of *gaz*," he said.

I think that I was then, for the first time, really frightened; twice before I had thought he was going off his head, but now he was so calm, so natural. He had dragged me four hundred miles at a critical time like this to eat sweets. I thought of calling Sergeant Holman, wondered where the doctor was, then changed my mind, and decided to temporize by humouring him.

I pulled the box close and took off the lid; inside, the thick white disks, dusted with the willow pollen, lay packed closely. I had got a piece halfway to my mouth before he spoke.

"I shouldn't eat it if I were you," he said quietly, "it would give you an awful tummy-ache—it's gelignite!"

Though it looked right, I should, I suppose, have sensed something was wrong by the feel; the piece had none of the springy sponginess of the sweet; it was hard, waxy, more like a section of a candle. I put it down very gingerly.

Sandy laughed. "It's perfectly safe as it is, you could put a match to it and it would just burn, but with a detonator . . ."

He got up and started pacing restlessly. "I'm certain that is what your *gaz* means," he said. "I was certain all along that you had not mistaken it for another word. But the answer came to me in an odd way.

"In Cornwall, have you ever been out with any of the local bad lots, fishing with gelignite they have pinched from the tin mines?

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You chuck it into the deep water by the cliffs and dive for the fish when they come up stunned. It has a funny code word. All you have to do is to go into almost any pub and ask for some sticks of 'sugar.' Perhaps I have had your *gaz* too much on the brain. But if sugar's a code word for an article in Cornwall to evade the police, why should not *gaz* serve the same purpose here to evade us?"

He had settled in his chair again; now he crashed his fist down on the desk, making the lethal box jump.

"I would bet my last rial," he exploded, "that that is what *gaz* means; and all these last few months while you and I have been footling around, gelignite has been bought up quietly all over Persia, doctored up like this, and sent by hand, by car, or by post to some central collecting-point." He looked hard at me. "And now I come to the dirty end of the stick; I'm afraid I know where one of those concentration points may be."

I was ready for it. "In the circle on the map," I said.

He shook his head: "I've got it nearer than that; by a cross marked on another map that only came into my hands yesterday."

He went over to the big safe, unlocked it, and swung open the door; then he came back to the desk, carrying a tattered, grease-stained map, in an even worse condition than the one I had seen before. "This was sent to me by our man in Meshed," he said.

"Is it a plant?" I asked.

He grunted and then spread the map out on his desk. It was torn, sweat-stained, and smelt horribly.

"There," he said, and pointed to a single red cross, now so blurred that its exact location was doubtful. I looked round for landmarks; the black strip of the railway was broken here into short sections by the innumerable tunnels and the blue line marking the river snaked along beside it. There was a black circle—a station—with the words: Haft Hose—Seven Pools.

I remembered the spot well. At Haft Hose, the railway made one of its spectacular dives through the spiral tunnels, doubling back again to reach the third level. You could almost throw a stone down on each, one level was so directly above the other. The station was on the highest plane; at the bottom the line ran on downhill, through several tunnels, with a cliff on one side and a forty-foot drop into the river on the other. Then the cliff jutted out in a spur, and here the line curved on its face; a narrow bridge carried it across the canyon to the far side. This was the point marked by the bottom of one of the legs of the red cross on the map. The other rested between the station and the steps of line below. As far as I could make out through the stains and dirt, the centre was in the valley behind the station: but there was nothing there, not even a track.

I told Sandy all this and we pored over the fragment, trying to find another clue. "Perhaps you are right and it is a plant, a feint for something in another direction. But we can't be too careful—think of the load that train is carrying and check every tunnel, bridge, culvert, and outside curve, particularly in that section."

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"That's fine," I thought, "there must be nearly two hundred of those in that part alone."

He looked at his watch. "You'll have to get cracking," he said. "Your plane back to Durud leaves the airport in half an hour."

I got up. "I'll stay round Haft Hose all the time till the train is through, and brief the other commanders accordingly."

He had risen also, and for the first time ever held out his hand. "Good luck to you, Bill—the very best of good fortune. I think we shall both need it. I shall be here all tomorrow night and between midnight and dawn I shall be on my knees on this carpet. It will all be yours then."

I managed to get through the outer office without having to look at that lonely desk, and six hours later was back on the job.

The ground round Haft Hose was just as I had remembered it. The station itself was a small white concrete building, divided into three rooms. There was the name-board, a single siding track, and nothing else save a rough path that led through a cleft in the hills behind. This opened into a narrow valley, empty but for a lonely goatherd and his flock.

In front of the station, the ground fell away straight to the river; the three levels of track were one below the other, the slopes between them made of loose scree, at a gradient of about one in two, cleared of boulders for fear of avalanches and landslides. At each side of this the rock jutted out like a buttress, pierced only by the mouths of the spiral tunnels. The slope there was very steep, bare rock; nothing could get up or down.

The bridge was even more difficult to approach from the outside. The spur of rock rose sheer from its end and went as straight down into the boulders of the river. The far end was unapproachable.

It was three in the afternoon when the code word was passed; the troop-train left Sultanabad and arrived at Durud about two hours later. I went down the line in my car behind it, having a last look at everything and watching the men deploy to their various posts. It was a long weary job and I was heartily thankful when at last we reached the end of my section at Andimesk.

When the last group had detrained, a slight khaki-clad figure detached itself from them and sidled over to me, grinning sheepishly. It was Bezard Ali. He looked at the ground and shuffled his feet when I asked him what the hell he was doing there.

"I thought you might need me, sahib," he said.

"Did Colonel Mackenzie give you leave to come?"

The answer was vague; Sandy hadn't actually said he could, but Bezard was sure he would have if he had thought of it.

"Colonel Mackenzie will probably sack you for this," I said, "but now you are here, you may as well come along with me."

He looked at the mountains that ringed us. "These are not my hills, but they are better than none. I wanted to be with you; and what will be will be."

I only wish I had known what was to happen.

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Haft Hose was about midway between Durud and Andimesk; having seen the troop-train safely into a siding, ready for the return trip the next day, I got into the rail-car with Bezard and Sergeant Henry Jones and drove back up the gorge over half the route to the danger spot.

All normal traffic had now been halted; at each station we passed, the sidings were full of freight trains, heavy with their load of tanks and other arms on their way up to Russia, their engine crews sitting beside the track, wondering at the delay.

As we rumbled on, over bridge and through cutting and tunnel, I checked point after point, flashing the recognition signal; back to us came the answering flickers in the growing dark and soon our headlights were picking out the twin ribbons of the rails ahead.

When we got to the bridge that had been marked on the map, I spent some time with the commander.

I had put the strongest guard that I could spare on it, just in case; commanded by a subaltern, there were thirty men of a British infantry regiment there.

I went over his dispositions and approved them. As I was getting back into the car, I said to him: "If there is anything you don't like the look of, fire first and ask questions afterwards. Don't hesitate to halt the train if you are in any doubt." Then I told him who were the passengers. He said: "Then I'll be glad of the extra men they have sent down from Haft Hose."

"What men?"

"A Havildar and six men from the Central India Horse—they came down from the station about an hour ago."

"Who sent them?" I knew nothing about this rearrangement.

"The Havildar said something about the Americans—but I've got the chit he brought with him here."

I looked at it with my flashlight. It was signed, "W. M——, Major, U.S. Army," and merely stated that pending the return of the Q.C. Zone, these extra men had been detached from the station guard. I thought it a bit calm; but perhaps something had happened and these orders might have come through from Sandy.

It was now quite dark and beginning to get cold; we put on our poshteens—heavy sheepskin coats—and I drove up the last stretch to the station. We dived in and out of the spiral tunnels, crossing and recrossing our path, each time gaining a level.

There was no excuse for what happened after that.

I drove out of the tunnel at the top level and slowed up at the station buildings. Then ran onto the ramp provided, unlocked the steering, and turned off the rails. I parked the car on the narrow space between the line and the precipice, facing out towards the gorge. As I got out and threw my poshteen into the back, an American soldier loomed up out of the darkness. He looked like a Top-Sergeant.

"Colonel Conway?"

"Yes?"

"Brigadier-General C——'s compliments, sir, and would you

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come and see him at once?" This in a strong Mid-west accent. I had heard of this American General, though I had never met him. I wondered what he was doing here; perhaps there had been some hitch and he had ordered the transfer of the Indian troops to the bridge.

"Wait here," I said to Bezard and Sergeant Henry Jones; then to the guide: "Where is the General?"

"In the station, sir. I'll show you."

As we crossed the yard to the station building, we had to go past the end of the freight train that was standing in the siding. I slid the beam of my flashlight over the end vehicle, a closed van, which was the nearest to me. Somehow I had a vague impression at the back of my mind—one of furious activity in the dark here when we emerged from the last tunnel, and which had been suspended the instant I had got out of the rail-car. The white circle of light fell on the bill of lading, a buff card, that was tacked to the side of the van. I went up close to read it. Clothing and equipment, it said. Still uneasy, I walked to the dark gap of the open sliding doors and flashed my light inside.

On top of the pile of bales and boxes sat a Russian guard in his dirty grey uniform, red star in cap. His eyes gleamed in the light like a reptile's, subhuman, as he stared at me, unblinking. As I took a step forward to have a closer look he made a slight, almost imperceptible motion towards me with the tommy-gun that was across his knees. I could see his finger tightening on the trigger.

The American coughed at my elbow. "The General is waiting, sir, it's urgent." I turned away.

Just as we got to the building, I thought I heard a faint cry behind us, but I did not turn round. I walked straight in and then stopped dead, blinded for a moment by the bright light. Then I heard the door slam behind me.

A voice said: "Good evening, Colonel."

Sitting at a table opposite, in an American one-star general's uniform, was The Sword. He was smiling and the Luger in his hand was very steady, pointing straight at my navel.

For a second I was off balance, completely bewildered. Then, regardless of the gun, I made a dive at him across the table. There was a quick movement behind me and something crashed down on the back of my head. The room spun round and dissolved into sparks. Far away, I heard a voice say: "Don't, there is to be no noise here." Then everything went dark.

The first thing that came back to me was the unpleasant smell of damp cloth, for my head and shoulders were wringing wet. Then they stopped pouring water over me and started to slap my face. My head was splitting and the light hurt my eyes; the gag in my mouth tasted like an old sock, my hands and feet were tied together, and I was lashed to a chair. In addition something had happened to the wound in my back, for it was hurting like hell.

The Sword did not seem to have changed his position; he was

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still sitting at the table, smoking a cigarette, watching me. Two men were with him, both in American officers' uniform; one was strange to me and the other was our young comrade of the hill-tents. I couldn't speak or move, and I didn't enjoy what I could see, so I closed my eyes again.

The Sword broke the silence. He said quietly, in English: "May I first congratulate you on your promotion—however short-lived it may be. I have no wish to make you more uncomfortable than is necessary. Will you give me your word not to raise your voice if I remove the gag?"

I nodded. The younger man came round and removed it.

"Thank you," I said, through swollen lips. "If you are concerned with my comfort, please retie my hands in front of me and loosen my legs a little; the wound in my back is very painful."

The Sword gave no sign that he was aware of this injury, but had my hands retied in front and eased my ankles. He poured out a large tot of neat whisky; he brought it over and held it to my mouth. Then he put a lighted cigarette between my lips; it tasted foul, but I was beginning to feel better.

"These small civilities, Conway, are a return for your service to me in sending back my son's things. It is ironic that you returned this "—he patted the Luger on the table beside him—" in view of the use it will be put to shortly."

There was still nothing to say; I remembered the trouble I had had getting the gun away from Bezard and wondered what had happened to him now.

The even voice went on: "I told you then that I considered you guilty of the murder of my son."

The door opened, and behind my head The Skull's voice said: "Why is he not gagged?"

Then he came into view; still in the nondescript khaki, drab beside the others, yet he overshadowed them completely by his presence and personality. He went up to the desk and laid two things down on it; one was a Yankee fore-and-aft forage cap, the other a high-peaked pahlevi. Through the dust that covered the last, the well-polished brass star of the R.A.S.C. gleamed out under the light bulb.

It was Bezard's.

The Sword raised his eyebrows and The Skull just nodded; then with a casual movement, he brushed them both off the table. There were two soft thuds as they fell to the floor.

There was nothing to do—nothing to say.

"Why is he not gagged?" The Skull repeated.

"He will have to talk soon and I thought that—"

The long thin man gave a gesture of irritation. "If you must. But you will have to excuse my non-attendance. Apart from boring me, someone must go round and make a final check."

He looked at his watch and then straight at The Sword. "Half an hour, then—and no rough stuff. I want some intelligent conversation with this gentleman when I come back."

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Perhaps it could be said that in its strictest sense the orders on "rough stuff" were obeyed, but the next half hour was very uncomfortable. Through the pleasantries I kept quiet and bit my tongue; to the questions whether I knew the answer or not, I found refuge in one answer. Over and over again, I gave the Army's antidote to P.O.W. interrogation; monotonously, just my name, rank, and regimental number. Only once, at the very end did I vary this; when The Sword gave me a very pretty opening, I told him, briefly, to try and perform an impossible athletic trick.

For the first time he spoke to me in English.

"I don't think you will be quite so cocky, Colonel, when you face the firing-squad at dawn—" he looked at his watch—"today."

Then the door opened and The Skull came in again. "Well?"

His glance turned from me, trussed in my chair, to the three grouped round the table. "Have you got all your answers?"

The Sword shook his head. "No—but I have just told our friend that he has not much time left to talk at all."

The Skull shrugged. "I expect he knew that—just as we already knew almost all he could tell us. But—if it has made you happy . . ." He looked towards the door. "As an ex-engineer, my friend, I should be glad of expert attention to the wiring and detonators. I want a few minutes with the Colonel—alone."

When they had filed out, he sat on the table, swinging his long legs; then he lit a cigarette and drew hard on it before examining the glowing end with attention.

"I've been thinking while I was out there," he said, "that you were just the right material. Would you give up everything—and come and work for us? The reward would be great."

Always, he seemed fated to give me the wrong opening.

"*Work for the Friends of Iran?*" I said. "No, thank you—I'm allergic to — —." The Persian phrase is only just translatable and certainly unprintable; it covers some of the more bizarre human activities.

His face went even whiter. "That is the second time you have insulted me—" His foot lashed out and caught me full in the mouth; my head went back with a jerk, the chair tilted over, and I skidded on it to crash against the door. When he came over and pulled me upright, I was spitting out blood and teeth.

He sat on the table again. "No more remarks like that, please, or"—he looked at the burning end of his cigarette—"you'll get this stuffed up your nose. I'm told it hurts."

Then he looked at me in silence for a while.

"No, it wouldn't work," he said, half to himself. "It would be too difficult to get you up north, the indoctrination would take too long and in the end you would never believe it. What a pity."

Then, more directly to me: "Would you like to ask any questions?"

He must have realized that I knew now there was no escape; but it was odd that he should say this for the only thing, the last thing, left to me was curiosity. "The Friends of Iran?" I asked.

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He laughed. " I, Conway, am the Friends of Iran."

" But you said ' us ' just now."

" That is different. I cannot tell you the whole story, for there might still be a chance for you to speak. I work for bigger and better things in the status quo." He smiled insolently.

So Brooks had been right.

" I can't wait till you are made the first Commissar," I said.

He looked straight at me. " You won't be around, but "—he sneered—" is there any reason why I should not? "

As there was nothing one could say to that, I changed the subject. " How did you get here? " I asked.

" It was easy. It is surprising what a few resolute men can achieve with bluff—far more than a crowd by force. Whatever their nationality, troops have a great respect for uniform and an air of authority. We dressed ourselves suitably, we acquired one of the rail-cars farther up the line, and your recognition signals from one of its previous occupants. Then we just came up here, took over the station, and dispersed the guard. What could the poor Indian Lieutenant in charge do to an American Brigadier who shouted at him? He did what he was told without question. Incidentally, we were not certain you would be here—is it by design or by chance? "

" By chance."

Even now, I was not giving anything away—not even my knowledge of the red cross on the map.

I was thinking: It must be easy—if I had not known The Sword by sight, and he had arrived here, blustering in the stars of an American General, would I have thought or dared to ask for any credentials?—Probably not.

The voice went on quietly: " Though you have not asked me, I take a pride in my work and it is good for an amateur to have a lesson in how things should be done—even if it is too late to profit by it. So I shall tell you what we are going to do to your train. Whoever did the reconnaissance of these parts must have been not up to the job—"

" I did it."

He shrugged his shoulders: " Did you have a look up the valley behind the station? "

" Yes. But there was nothing there except goats and sheep."

" If you had looked more often and more closely, you would have noticed that every day that flock was getting slightly larger; reinforcements were driven in each night, and each beast was carrying a small load—a few bits of gelignite, cut up in boxes."

" *Gaz*," I said.

He looked across at me. " So you know about that? "

" Yes; how, when it was too late—where, not at all."

He did not press for details but went on: " The total is now quite large—nearly two tons is at this moment being loaded into the first two trucks of the freight train in the siding. Then we wait; we let the pilot and the main train through here; we block the

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line so that the after-guard cannot get past. By this time the main train will be near the bridge farther down, where I have arranged a small demonstration—It will only be enough to cause a short halt, but it will give us enough time to set a contact detonator and send the two loaded trucks and the engine down the line after them. I need not point out that just before the bridge, the train will literally be perched on a narrow ledge; the collision should be enough to send it into the river, but the gelignite will blow it to hell. We shall not try conclusions with the after-guard; we shall disperse quietly, taking you to be dealt with . . . See?"

I saw too well; the clearest thing was that nothing seemed to to be able to go wrong.

The Skull looked at his watch. "Time is getting on; anything more?"

"Just two short ones." I had to force the words out between lips that were now swelling up like balloons; my tongue had told me that at least two front teeth had gone.

He nodded. "Well?"

"The Russian by the truck?"

"Here, or the corpse in the wrecked car in the desert?"

"Both."

There was silence while he lit another cigarette and leaned back in his chair, blowing out a thin stream of smoke.

"In the desert, I thought someone was about to double-cross me," he said, "and here they are on loan."

"Tania Raboneckiwitz"—I stumbled over the name—"did you do it?" Then I thought: That is the first time, the only time I shall say that name. I always teased her by saying I couldn't pronounce it.

The Skull was looking at his nails, examining each with great care. "I thought that one would come," he said. "I can understand your feelings, but a man of your intelligence should see that the situation is not without humour, nor a sense of poetic justice."

He looked up at me. "Actually, on that evening, I was after your Colonel Mackenzie; I had been trailing him all day. I had decided that little ginger spider had woven enough webs in Teheran. Then, when I saw who was with him in the cinema, I thought to myself: So, he is with Conway's mistress—the clever gentleman has already made a fool of me in front of the tribe by accusing me of stealing her. I will make it true now for good."

He got up. "You can thank God I had no time to be anything but quick and sure," he said.

For the first time, I really hated him. "You misbegotten bastard!" was all I could get through my closing mouth. They were probably the last words I should be able to speak.

He took not the slightest notice as he came towards me with the piece of cloth in his hand. "There has been enough talk, and time is getting short. You shall have a grand-stand seat for the proceedings. But first, the gag; the train will pass so close that I cannot expect you to keep your word."

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I tried to bite his fingers as he stuffed the filthy rag into my mouth and tied it in place. Then he went to the door and called out softly. The others came in and, loosing the ropes that held me in the chair, they carried me, still bound hand and foot, out across the rails to the patrol car, which was standing where I had left it. They threw me in the front seat and as I lay half under the wheel, pushed me up behind it. There was no sign of Bezard or Sergeant Henry Jones, nor did I expect there to be, now or ever.

I sat, unable to speak or move, staring out over the gorge.

I did not know the time, but the half-moon was up; too feeble to give a clear light, but just enough to see my surroundings. I knew them well, anyway.

The hard, beaten gravel stretched ahead of me for about five yards, then, without parapet, stopped in an abrupt line where the ground fell away into the gorge below. From there came the dull roar of the River Diz. On the far side the opposite cliff rose, black and sheer, to where the high peaks were dusted with the first snow. The truck was left-hand drive, and though I could not turn, I had a fairly clear view of what was behind me in the driving mirror.

There was some twenty yards to the main track; then the station building, with some lights showing from the windows. Behind that lay the siding with the stationary freight train; a group of men were still round the buffers of the last two trucks, and the Diesel engine that was hitched on to them. There was a box there on the ground that looked as if it might contain detonators—I did not doubt for a moment that The Skull's tale was entirely true.

Apart from the natural instinct of self-preservation, the appalling consequences of the coming disaster were looming larger every moment: and there was nothing that I could do.

My hands and feet were tied in an expert manner—not too tight to stop the circulation, but completely restricting any movement. The cord was not thick, but very strong. My arms were in such a position that, though still in front of me, I could do no more than just grip the underside of the rim of the steering-wheel with the ends of my fingers. I strained hard to see if I could get them over to press the horn button. It was well out of reach, and anyway, what would be the use?

But I went on trying. All I succeeded in doing was to tear the skin of my wrists and get the palms of my hands about an inch apart.

No one came near me; I went on trying any movement just for the warmth. The next thing I discovered was that now, by gripping the rim of the steering-wheel hard, I could take the weight of my body off the seat enough to be able to shift a little sideways. During one of these manœuvres, somehow I got my legs entangled in the gear lever with one foot on each side of it. As I strained to release them a faint grating feeling was transmitted from the ropes to my legs. I moved them slowly up and down again—yes, there must be some sort of rough edge on the casting of the gear lever. I went on rubbing. I was dripping with sweat, the breath whistled

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through my nose in agonized gusts. As the gap widened, my work became easier, but I was nearly done for when all four strands were through. My legs were free and I could kick—now I had the vestige of a plan.

Keeping my legs deep in the shadow under the dashboard, I examined all I could see of the truck. In front of me was the ignition switch—a hand one without a key—and the choke control. How easily did she start?—I couldn't remember, and she must be very cold by now. Back right was bottom gear; if I could manage to engage the lever, now I could work the clutch and accelerator easily. If I kept my legs tight together the severed ropes would not show, as they were tied separately round each ankle. If I were made to get out, the only thing was to try and run for it, but I did not fancy my chances with bound hands—the real hope depended on being left alone and the quick starting of the truck.

But I was not to be left in peace; the crunch of steps came from behind, and in the mirror I saw The Skull and The Sword. Now they stood beside me.

"Enjoying the view, Colonel?"

I shook my head.

"Perhaps that is understandable. Your train is due in about five minutes—they have just telephoned through from Durud to tell us. Well, I promised you a fine view, and here it is. I am leaving this officer to guard you—I must be near to pay my respects to Mr. Churchill and President Roosevelt as they pass. Would you like to be driven a little closer to the edge?"

Again I shook my head—whatever happened, I must not leave that driving seat.

"As you wish—you will certainly see the flash and hear the explosion from where you are."

He turned. "Shoot him if he tries anything—you had better get in beside him." To me: "I shall say good-bye to you in the morning."

Then he left. The Sword got in. He looked at the ropes that bound my hands, but, thank God, he did not bother about my feet. Far up the valley came the mournful wail of a whistle—the pilot train was nearly here. I had to alter my plan; he sat still beside me, his automatic held ready.

After a few minutes, I started to make gurgling sounds in my throat; they were not all pretence, as my mouth was agony and the gag was nearly choking me. First he merely said: "Quiet!" Then, he put his gun on the seat beside him and turned towards me, bending forward to feel for the knots in the gag that were behind my head. This was what I wanted and was waiting for.

I have said that I held the black belt of judo, and like all of this degree, had been initiated into the higher secrets of the sport. There are deadly locks that are considered too dangerous for anyone of less skill to learn; certain nerve-points on the human body where a sudden pressure or blow will produce instantaneous unconsciousness—even death. On these we are sworn to secrecy.

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Enough to say that, when he turned towards me, I was after one of these points, and that two of them became uncovered. I could not press or hit straight, but I had turned my hands together over on their sides, and with their edge made one quick chopping blow, using all my remaining strength.

It connected; I think that probably I killed him outright. He gave a strangled grunt and slumped over on top of me. Pushing hard against his body, I managed to lever him back into an upright position. Though his cap had stayed on, his head was lolling forward on his chest and soon someone was sure to notice.

The pilot train saved me. From round the bend up the gorge, came again the wail of its whistle, and a faint sighing from the rails behind me soon changed to a rumble; then it was sweeping through the station. I did not bother to look; this was the one moment when everyone there would be watching it and not me. As best I could, I turned on my side and tried to feel over The Sword's body. Fumbling with my tied hands, I found a jack-knife, attached by a swivel, on his belt.

Before the sound of the pilot train had died away, by tearing my nails, I managed to get the blade sprung open. Then I had to stop and sit still, looking to my front—I dared not have any suspicions starting now.

It seemed an age, though it could only have been a few minutes, before the line started to rumble again and the main train was on us. Again I did not see it; I had turned and was working desperately, pressing the back of the knife-blade hard against the body and sawing up and down on the edge against the ropes between my wrists. The noises behind me told me what I could not see.

First, the growing roar of the rails and three blasts on the engine whistle, synchronized, I suppose, with the flashes of the recognition signal; then a deep-throated chugging, mixed with a high whine, from the two Diesel engines; finally, the clack-clack on the rails of the wheels of the coaches. In the mirror, I just caught one gleam of the sleeping-cars gliding by; behind those drawn blinds, the major part of the brains and leadership of the Allied cause were going quickly to an awful death.

I was still slashing away, and it was terribly difficult; though the blade was sharp, the knife kept on turning on its side and I could not steady it. Twice I cut myself before it was done; but strand by strand the rope parted, and then my hands were free.

Flexing my hands below the wheel, I had to wait again. I could not see down into the gorge, but I could hear the train passing from right to left across the slope below me; then there was silence as it entered one of the spiral tunnels; again it came, fainter and farther below, as it went in the opposite direction towards the last straight down to the bridge.

During these minutes no one came near—they had no time for bound, escorted prisoners in the tremendous activity that was going on behind me. To sharp commands, the clank of couplings, and the chug of a Diesel, the last two vans were pulled off the train

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on the siding and reversed onto the main line, with the engine in the rear. A group of figures were intent on some adjustment to the buffers of the leading truck.

Then, from down the gorge, a white flare soared in the air and there was a sharp burst of firing. The note of the Diesel engine in the station increased, and pushing the two trucks before it, slowly moved off down the grade towards the opening of the first tunnel.

In the mirror I saw a tall thin khaki-clad figure swing himself up into the engine-cab as it moved off—he and the engine crew must be going to jump off when they had negotiated the tunnels and were safely on the bottom straight. It was now or never. For the last time I gave a quick look at the dashboard in front of me. I turned the ignition switch and the warning light glowed red. Holding the clutch down, I pushed the gear lever into bottom; then I pulled out the choke and jumped on the starter.

The engine coughed twice and leapt into life. I trod on the accelerator and let the clutch in with a bang; the wheels spun and threw up showers of dirt. We jerked forward, pausing for a moment on the edge as the underside of the truck grounded; then, with the body lolling drunkenly beside me, we plunged down the slope.

I do not think that until I hit the edge anyone behind realized what was happening. Then, there were shouts and two or three wild shots followed me. But I hardly heard them; I was concentrating on the slope ahead and wrestling with the wheel to try and keep the truck straight. The angle was horribly steep and the small stones that formed the scree were slipping all the time. The truck was trying to slide with them, and each time this happened the tail would swing round sideways. I remember thinking: "I must keep up speed; if the tail comes right round she'll turn over!"

I was halfway to the next level of track when the two vans appeared from the right-hand tunnel opening, moving across quite slowly below and in front of me. They saw me, started to slow down; then changed their minds and put on a burst of speed. I could see what they were thinking. They must, at all costs, pass in front of me on this level and the one below. Not only would their plan be wrecked if I beat them, but if the train hit the truck, they would be blown up as well, for it was a contact detonator.

So far, my only idea had been to get away; but their urgency had given me the hope of a plan. I had to get in front of them by the bottom level—I had to blow them up. My way was steeper, slower, but shorter; as well as having farther to go, they would also be in the dark as to my relative position while they were in the spiral tunnels.

They started firing at me from the windows of the cab; there was the crack of bullets coming straight and suddenly the windscreen starred to my right. As the train, rocking slightly, disappeared into the tunnel, they had a last try; there was a clang on the bodywork and then, with searing pain, it seemed as though a mighty hand hit my knee. A moment later I crashed onto the rails they had just covered; the truck bounded in the air and The

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Sword's body, rolling away from me, disappeared over the side of the low door. I was alone—now it was the tunnel against the slope.

And the slope was longer and steeper, for the difference in the two levels of track was greater than before. I gave the truck the gun; bumping and swaying, with the scree snarling under the wheels, I steered a slightly diagonal course towards the left-hand cliff face. The track level approached; I could see the faint gleam of the rails and the black hole that was the tunnel's exit from the cliff. It hypnotized me—who would get there first?

I did it—but only just. I hit the track not thirty yards from the tunnel mouth, sliding to a dead stop across the rails and cutting the engine in gear. But it was such a close-run thing that, through the rattle of the stones dislodged in my path, I could hear the dull rumble coming from the tunnel's mouth.

I heaved myself out of the driving seat; below me was a short, boulder-strewn slope—then the roaring Diz, its white foam flecking the darkness. My left leg, hit, would not take any weight; but hobbling, rolling, and crawling, I hurled myself desperately away from the truck, down towards the river.

Nearly there, I looked over my shoulder; the train came shooting out from the curve of the tunnel—and they saw the truck. There was a scream of brakes, but it was too late. The last thing I saw was one figure taking a flying jump from the engine, before I threw myself, with a sob, straight into the water.

It was a pool, not very deep; ice-cold, the noise of the water nearly deafened me—its force turning me over and over. The gag was clamped on my mouth and my lungs were bursting. I did not hear the explosion, but an immense force seemed to suck me and the river up, to dash us down again with equal violence. My head struck a rock and there were great splashes around me. I had to surface, and reaching a ledge of rock, at the third attempt, I managed to crawl ashore. Trying to stand, I found that now my leg was useless; so I lay back against a boulder, tearing at the gag in my mouth and looking at an awesome sight.

The air was full of an eddying grey fog of dust, lit by the yellow glow of the wrecked Diesel engine which was lying on its side half down the bank, fuel oil blazing furiously. Of the rest of the train and my truck, there was no sign; only a twisted length of rail reared up above the crater like a black snake in the light of the fire. It was the inferno.

A few moments' rest and I started a slow crawling search for my enemy; I pulled myself from boulder to boulder, getting as close as I could to the scorching fire, looking for some sign, some evidence. Then at last, I found it . . .

The Skull's face was looking at me from between two rocks. Expressionless, unmarked, the open eyes stared straight at mine in the flickering yellow light. Only there was no body beneath that head that had been tossed like a ball to lie jammed between the boulders. Blast plays some funny tricks. Then as I looked again, I started laughing. The "flowers" he had designed for another

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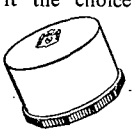

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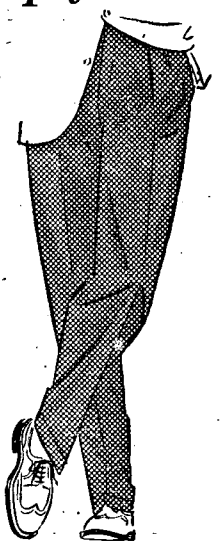

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funeral had come back to his own grave; they must have been purposely packed in one of the trucks to be scattered by the explosion. Now all around that dead, pale head, on the rocks and the ground, lay the square white cards of the Friends of Iran.

I was still staring at them, and I had started to talk to him, when the rescue party from the after-guard found me.

There is not much more to tell . . .

The after-guard had been stopped by the block before the station and were fighting it out with the remnants of the Friends of Iran when the explosion nearly blew them off their feet. They made for the fire and found me, nearly dead from loss of blood. They collected a few sand-bags of bits of The Skull and his companions. The Sword lay dead on the upper slope and two more they had killed in their action. The rest, they did not know how many, had got away into the mountains.

The main train had been halted at the bridge by a boulder being rolled down onto the line from a cliff that I had thought unclimbable. This had been beautifully timed for the rest of their operations. After the boulder was cleared, the train reached its destination without further incident.

As soon as I could be moved, Sandy had me flown out to Egypt. I convalesced in Alexandria, and on a glorious first of June, landed in England, for the first time for four years. Like all waifs and strays, I gravitated to London. On a lovely morning, I boarded a bus in Piccadilly for Victoria, on my way to pay a duty call on an aunt. It was a long time since I had ridden like this, and when the conductor came round for the fares, absently I handed him a penny. The conductor, a pimply youth, should have known better.

"Wake up, mate!" he said. "The lowest fare is three-halfpence. Where have you been all these years?" Then, looking at my tanned face—"Sunbathing?"

Confused, I muttered an apology and gave him the extra coin; I felt all eyes on the lower deck were fixed on me.

But the portly gentleman sitting beside me was not prepared to let the matter go at that. He was pointing, for the benefit of all, at the ribbon of the D.S.O. which was now beside the O.B.E. and Africa Star on my breast.

"You don't get those sunbathing—you cocky little sod!" he said in a loud voice.

The conductor was unwise enough to answer back, and a general verbal mêlée ensued; embarrassed at being the cause of a scene, I got off the bus when it stopped at the next traffic light. I limped slowly into Green Park.

It was very green and peaceful there. Only the scars of slit-trenches marred the grass; children were out playing happily. I found a chair and sat down, tilting back my cap towards the sun.

Nearer and closer things came back. The Skull, that pale and sucked-in face, hanging between the boulders, staring at me; The Sword as he had stood, straight and bright, on that first day in the

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kalantar's ceremonial tent; his son lying still in the chequered moonlight in the ruins of the palace of Xerxes at Persepolis—three men I had killed, whose names I did not even know.

Coming towards me through the children's game, I seemed to see little Manassian, tubby and white, clutching his panama hat; then Bezard, with slow easy stride, white teeth flashing in welcome; Tania, last of all, blue eyes beneath arched eyebrows, tilt-tipped nose, red hair flying. All were gone—but the River Diz was still roaring, green in its gorge; the moonlight was turning Persepolis to silver; roses were spinning and the nightingales throbbing in Bagh-i-Aram.

I remembered the words that Shabistari sang in Persia, seven hundred years ago: *God hath planted beauty in our midst, like a flag in the city.* It was pleasant, sitting there in the sun.

-Christopher Landon's novel is about to be published by Heinemann, under the title, "A Flag in the City."

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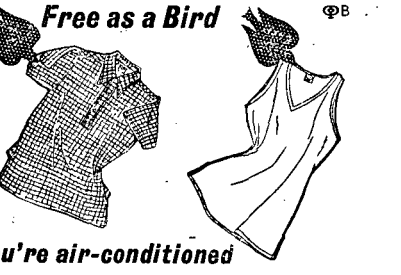

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No. 13

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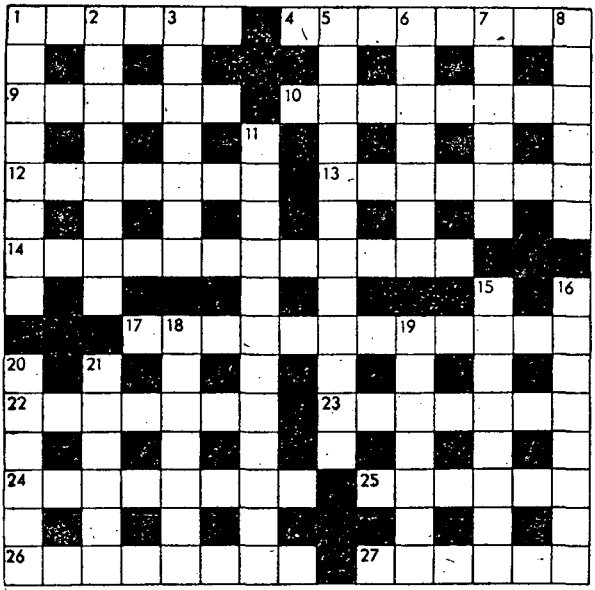

BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE.

Name .....

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CUT ALONG THE LINE

CLUES

Across

1 Sounds as if the bird's out of breath ! (6).

4 The commonplace seaman is less than able (8).

9 "If there's delight — — 'tis when I see That heart, which others bleed for, bleed for me" (Congreve) (2, 4).

10 Fault the A.F.S. for a divine impulse (8).

12 We are silent for the classic historian (7).

13 Each ear-knocked about, might suffer this (3-4).

14 The anniversary of a Communist landlord ? (3, 6, 3).

17 The *patrons of these* restaurants must be very hungry indeed (6-6).

22 A broken oar before a Chinese dynasty ? You must be wandering ! (7).

23 No animal, but it has horns (7).

24 To exorcise in a depressing way ? (8).

25 The end followed with a girl inside (6).

26 Neither ebb nor flow at this time of day (8).

27 Courageous Cockney negative (2, 4).

Down

1 You could use these artists to tie up a boat (8).

2 Presumably you would *have to commit this nine* times to get results (8).

3 Tie vine in knots for this kind of guest (7).

5 Loot one military formation to obtain another (5, 7).

6 Orsino's dukedom (7).

7 Not necessarily the highest part of Greece (6).

8 Villon asked where this year's snows were (6).

11 This sedentary worker is not fair game (1, 7, 4).

15 Traditional measure of quietness, unless the cat's away (2, 1, 5).

16 You would expect him to be a bit insular (8).

18 I tin Sam, and make him a kind of philosopher (7).

19 "Run, run, — : carve on every tree The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she" (Shakespeare) (7).

20 This game should bring people together (6).

21 "Go fetch to me a pint o' wine, An' fill it in a silver — " (Burns) (6).

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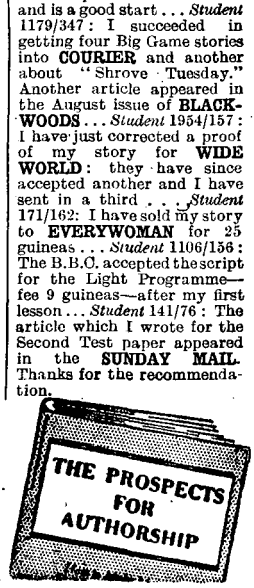

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